THE IDEA OF CULTURE

Cacutta
2018

Every emotion has a landowner

HISTORY for PEACE
History remains a continuous narrative of preselected events, where neither the basis for the selection of those particular events is examined, nor their relevance. Students of history therefore are trained to receive a certain body of information which they generally commit to memory and which they then go on repeating ad infinitum when they in turn become teachers of history or when they attempt writing history. Another reason for this highly unsatisfactory research in a particular field of history is rarely incorporated into standard works and textbooks. Thus in most schools and colleges the student of history is still learning the subject, both in content and in technique, as it was taught one generation (if not two) ago.

Romila Thapar

PeaceWorks—an initiative of The Seagull Foundation for the Arts addresses this and many other issues through its History for Peace project by showcasing and engaging with alternative work—in the arts—in education and in civil society—with the aim of exploring possibilities of bringing these into classrooms.

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I begin with a small paragraph from a letter I wrote to Romila Thapar, who is here.

I removed the mirror from the wall,
Tested the hook, checked if it would take the weight,
Replaced it with my shadow, hung it on the hook.
Having done this exchange, what else would I call it?
I looked into the shadow and found the mirror looking back at me.

Turning away in surprise, I found myself looking into the eyes of my shadow, only it wasn’t looking at me.

Over my shoulder, yes, at the mirror, which no longer reflected the face of my shadow, for it wasn’t there to reflect.

Having myself removed it a moment ago,
I found it hard to understand or explain.

So I started all over again, this time making sure to get it right,

I removed the mirror from the wall, checked the hook, tested it, making sure it would take the weight, before
taking off my shadow, hanging it on the hook, replacing one with the other, the shadow in place of the mirror.

Having done this exchange, this barter, this trade, this swap, this bold even clever negotiation, this striking a deal, what else would I call it?

I looked up at the mirror and found a shadow, whispering my name.

What is a shadow? Is it but part of oneself?
Yes, up to a point.
Or is it outside oneself?
Yes, up to a point.
Is it that which is part of oneself but keeps on changing its form as the light changes?
So what is it reflecting? and can these reflections have meaning?
Or are they completely at variance with oneself as with the changing light?
Is one’s shadow, one’s other beings sometimes visible, and sometimes completely invisible if not absent?
Does one’s shadow help one to see oneself?
Yes, up to a point.
But does it help one to understand oneself?

‘This is worth thinking about’, this was Romila’s response.

This negotiation between the shadow self and the self as reflected being in the mirror,
This to me is one possible idea of culture. There are others.

I wish I could tell you there was only one truth, a single solitary truth.
The one we conjure up, magicians that we are of dailiness.

Morning, noon, evening, night, day after day, starting life as a figment, tiny seedling, our only truth, this one truth.

It isn’t.

People are born into their versions of truth. They live them, every day, in the confinement of their solitude. Single, even troubled truth. Some do it with a degree of magnanimity about other truths, existing, breathing, living what we call our lives, not in a singular manner, plural, regardless of our unpalatable lives. These breaths, these existences may be, others are distressed, agitated, angered by the presence of parallel truths in their lives and in the lives of others.

Other, always the other, hinting, condoning, pointing at exclusion. There is the truth of us. Therefore, there is the lie of the other. Because, this will not match their own frames or ours for that matter, you must arrive, arrive I say at an understanding of what works best for you, and like Leah learn to live with difference.

Remember, none of this is anything but an acquired skill. This learning too is a culture. *Viraasat*, inheritance, an entire system of learning that makes mockery of a scientific way of imbibing things cultural, one that depends on memory and the circumstances of sensed impressions, customs, facts, oral bits that are handed down. And the stories we enact as rituals and pass on. A sharing across times and generations, we all do it in some form or another. There is also the constant state of sharing that happens within us as individuals, like conversations with oneself.

But then, this act of conversing within the evolved self, in our heads and hearts is not just confined to a monologue, there are multiple selves in an amalgamation of inherited memories within beings like a dead souls’ archives—relatives, families, friends and what of the many literary
experiences that form layer after layer of yes, passionately imbibed culture in the form of our reading lives, thus inheriting others and their cultures. This is of particular interest to me as a publisher.

There are many ways a child will come to learn his mother’s tongue, the language of birth, spoken from a far off place, while the protective cocoon of the womb holds it secure, but allows it to listen every murmur. Every whisper finds its way to the child’s heart through its yet to be formed ears, later it will hear before it can begin to speak.

I first learned the language my mother spoke on her lap in Kashmir while I slept. In fact, the first words that reached me were not spoken but sung, I heard songs, as murmurs, as whispers, as lullabies, as language that soothes, as night sounds that lulled me to sleep. The morning song was different, it had a baser timber to it, a fine deep throated song that flowed effortlessly through my father’s throat. He sang while he dressed for work, the popular music of the time, songs that the heroes and heroines in the black and white era sang to each other expressing love and anger and happiness and sorrow, despair, heartache, joy, devotion, war, famine, birth, death, just about every emotion known to mankind. He seemed to know them all and sing them well.

Later the film folk from Bombay discovered Kashmir. My father, as assistant manager at the Oberoi Palace, would invite the Kishore Kumars, the Lalits, the Nargises, the Sunil Dutts, the Padmini and Ragini sisters, the Rajkapoors, the Sameers to his humble quarters at the foot of the hill, just above the hotel rooms and vast lawns. My mother’s tomato pulao, kheer and gajar ka halwa had been discovered by the visiting stars, who would be relaxed after a hard day’s shoot, and happy to unwind and make themselves at home, sitting on our mats and eating from our thalis, the evening would begin and end in song. Singing soirees at home, sleeping in a lap, comfortable, secure, drifting back to memories of a
time before I was born. I would listen from afar even as I fell into deep sleep.

Years later I would remember the ghazals and the songs, more importantly I would hum the tunes, later, much later I would begin to speak Hindi and Punjabi and bits of Urdu. Even later, the nuns of St. Presentation Convent would take me into their charge and teach me a whole new language, English.

I am a publisher, one who has learned to disrespect the notions of boundaries as we know them, not out of the sense of arrogance or ‘I know better’, no, out of reasons that are political. As most things these days need to be and yes cultural, always cultural, our baggage, boundaries, man-created, nation-made. To me the idea of cultural travels, translates, turns the reality of its own self, the one it began with, into the reality of the one defined by the idea of culture as the other. Instead of opening up possibilities, we set up nations, states that ghettoize the book, make it a commodity to be hounded, chased to the ground, bought and sold across territories, across languages, like literary slaves.

I guess what I am attempting to express is that in this, our world of publishing, too much time, energy, money is spent on creating structures, that ultimately box us in, and yet these boundaries do melt and blur, when so many emotions springing from what you do and what we do, the way you do them, the way we do them, the tingle and the excitement of the words we find, translate, secure, bind in the nicest possible manner for a community of interested readers, who don’t really know, or if they did know, don’t always give a damn about labels and territories and conveniences, both public and private—knowing very little about how a book makes its way into their hands, as long as it continues to do so, with regularity that can only be described as unrelenting and reliable and timely.
Here this morning, we have gathered to discuss, debate, even explore the idea of culture, and all I have done is offer you tangential distractions in the form of poetry and suggestion and favour. Make what you will of it, this idea of culture.

Kozo Yamamura, friend, author, patron of PeaceWorks, a good human, died on 15th February 2017 of cancer. Professor Yamamura, was a world class scholar, writing or editing more than 20 books on the Japanese economy and its history and on the nature of capitalism. Legendary teacher, Yamamura challenged generations of Washington University students with courses on Post-war Japanese economy and the Economic History of Japan. He was a generous academic, mentor, colleague.

One day Kozo found his way to the work that we do under our PeaceWorks programme. Out of the blue he sent us a generous donation in support of the program. An unsolicited act of goodness, with a courteous letter of quiet praise. This was six years ago. Each year, since then, he had been donating $30,000. We never met him, nor did he ever visit Calcutta to see what we were doing with his generous support. But he followed every bit of our work online and showed complete trust and affection and often told us how important it was in these times to keep doing what we did.

It is with immense pleasure and pride that we dedicate this conference to the memory of our friend Kozo.

And finally, one last but vital thank you to dear Anil Mukherjee, friend and secretary of the Tollygunge Club, who has once again gone out of his way to be hugely generous and courteous, and his entire team for their continued support and hospitality.

Thank You.
Audrey Truschke. We are here to talk about the shape of cultures, in the plural, in history, specifically in the second millennium, in India. I thought we might start by talking about ‘religion’. Religion is—as far as I am concerned—often the elephant in the room. I mention religion in particular, because I was reading Kunal’s introduction to Romila’s book published earlier this year, *The Historian and Her Craft*, a four-volume work on religion and society. Kunal very correctly points out that Romila often writes about religion—in fact, she often forefronts it, and that is rather unusual for a historian.

Historians cite religion with some frequency, especially as a sort of legitimation tool for political power. For example, they will point out that a certain king benefitted from patronizing a temple or claimed to be nearly divine. However, in terms of thinking about religion itself—as a set of beliefs, as a set of
practices, as a social phenomenon—that is quite unusual for historians.

Religion is something that unites all four of us on this panel today. Kunal, for example, has written at length about religion as a social phenomenon, including as a way through which the Brahmins interacted with indigenous social groups; he has also explored what happened through those interactions. Anand has talked about religion in a slightly different way in his recent book *Jinnealogy*, where he discusses Islam as an almost ethical inheritance. He has analysed Islam not as a set of theological precepts or something defined by going to the mosque but as a sort of inheritance that can be claimed by not only Muslims but also by all Indians.

In my own work, I have vacillated on the topic of religion. In my first book, *Culture of Encounters*, I shied away from religion. I chose to write about Persian and Sanskrit-based interactions and avoid the over-familiar discussions about Hindu–Muslim encounters. And I argued about how those interactions were really more defined by literary cultures and not so much about religion. More recently however I have returned to, or started anew with, using religious categories in my work. In part, that is a practical move as I increasingly try to speak with non-academic audiences—and so I need to use terms that everyone is familiar with. If we always use specialized terminology, no one outside the academy will know what we are talking about. But I have also returned to using religious categories because I think they are important—I think religion is important, and it does make a difference to how we understand history. It is everything beyond that which is subject to debate and analysis. Why is religion
important? How does it matter through the course of the second millennium AD in South Asia? What religions are we even talking about, and in fact, what is religion itself (this being a category that really came to India as late as the nineteenth century)? So, with that, perhaps we will begin. If I can invite Romila to comment first, then we’ll go to Kunal, and Anand, and then the audience.

Romila Thapar. I am going to take a much wider view of the subject and talk about religion as part of culture. Therefore we need to be much more careful about how we define culture. Not just careful, but concerned. We have taken it for granted far too long. I think it is about time we look at it again and, in that, religion comes in as a category.

I am also going to talk about the link between culture and history, which I think is a very important one. To use the analogy that Naveen used earlier about the mirror and the shadow: one keeps on asking oneself which in fact is the mirror and which the shadow in the relationship between culture and history.

Is culture deliberately constructed to suit a particular purpose? Who constructs it? From what? Objects, monuments, ideas? Why is it constructed—with what intention? Now, in a sense, these sets of questions could also be asked of religion. I don’t know what answers we are going to get, but certainly one can think of it as a construction. Then, the questions follow: Who does the constructing? Is culture singular or do we have to talk about cultures?—and I believe the latter. Are our cultures or is any one culture among them self-contained, distinct? Or do they get integrated into each other and into the more dominant aspects of society? Do cultures pertain to only one segment of society?
In particular, what do we mean when we speak of a Culture? When we talk about culture, our ancient culture, Indian culture, when we are trying to define this, are we defining it only in terms of a single segment of society? If that is so, it is generally the elite. Very few people will talk about anything other than the culture of the elite when they talk about ancient Indian culture. This is partly because it is a little difficult to reconstruct the culture of the non-elite due to the paucity of sources from this segment of society. Nevertheless, the interest is focused very much on a particular section of society.

Then the inevitable question comes: What is it that ultimately causes the non-elite to intrude, or to get inducted into what we call culture? And I would like to say that up to about the nineteenth century, what was defined as culture was the articulation of the dominant social groups’ past and present—what we assumed was the articulation of the groups of the past and what we know to be the articulation of the groups in the present. This was emphasized in the concept of civilization, and civilization has had three features that have been centrally important: (a) firmly demarcated territory (b) a single religion and (c) a single language. This ‘single religion’ in the concept of civilization gives additional force to our understanding of the role of religion in history. I have problems with all three, but I will not go into them now because that is a different story altogether.

The other problem about the concept of civilization is that it has been treated as uniform and unitary. There were blocks: Graeco-Roman civilizations, Europe—West Asia—Islamic Civilization, South Asia—Sanskrit Civilization, China—Confucian Civilization.
And these blocks moved forward in time. There really was not too much understanding of how the blocks were created and why they moved. But the twentieth century did see a shift in the meaning of culture and in the meaning of civilization. Some of us, for example, are worried about regarding civilization as a block—according to us, it is something that emerges out of the interaction between various groups. It is actually a very porous construction, unlike what we have been made to believe.

That’s one set of questions that relates to culture, to history, to religion and so on. I would also like to look at the role that history—or the treatment of history—has had in defining both religion and culture, and briefly talk about periodization.

We are all aware of the outlines. Periodization started with [James] Mill’s periodization of Indian History as the Hindu, Muslim and British periods. Mill was the founder, the creator, of the Two Nation theory. The Hindus and the Muslims formed two nations and were constantly antagonistic towards each other, and the periodization therefore was applied to Indian history. Even the labels—Ancient, Medieval and Modern periods—are a reiteration of the Hindu, Muslim and British periods, because the parameters do not change in the reiteration. But this periodization has other effects which I think are very important for the understanding of both culture and religion.

The periodization, as it existed, assumed that once the so-called Hindu period came to an end in AD 1200, the texts that were used to reconstruct the culture, the religion and the history of that period would come to an end. So people stopped looking at Sanskrit texts and inscriptions—they believed that would all be written
in Persian and Turkish from then on because Persian- and Turkish-speaking people had become the rulers. So, source material that was crucial to the study of culture and religion was, as it were, put aside and not given the kind of importance that it should have been given. The importance of Sanskrit continues, as when I look at the inscription [from AD 1264], for example, which has both Sanskrit and Arabic versions. A Persian trader issues an inscription in Somnath, Gujarat, where he wants to build a mosque. The local people who are all Hindus are only too keen to give him land and facilities for doing so. The feeling one has is that here is a community that is so anxious to accept the activity of trade that religion doesn’t really interfere. They seem to have forgotten about Mahmud [of Ghazni] raiding the temple of Somnath, because they are perfectly ready to give grants of land from the estates of that same temple to this trader.

Or, you have the inscription near Delhi—the Palam Baoli inscription—in which, again, there is a merchant from Uch (near Multan in the Punjab) praising Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the local ruler, and describing him as very helpful and a great patron. This inscription therefore links the coming of the Turkish rule with the earlier rulers of Delhi, namely, the Tomars and the Chauhans before Muhammad and his dynasty. It would seem that there was a smooth transition. One does not know how smooth it actually was, but it is worth considering that the people who were putting up these inscriptions and writing these texts had a different view of history from what we have, in terms of the change that took place during that time.

Sanskrit continues to be used in some of the most interesting texts of the big courts; the other texts come
from the smaller royal courts of local rajas. My favourite two are the ‘Chamba vamshavali’ [chronicles of the rulers of Chamba], written in Sanskrit, and the ‘Mushaka vamsha-kavya’ [chronicles of the Mushaka dynasty in the form of an epic poem] from Travancore, also written in Sanskrit but which, I am sure, nobody really understood except those who composed it. But there we are. This continues, the epics continue, the Puranas continue. When I say the epics continue, I mean that they continue to be written in local languages, regional languages which become important for us. There are grammars, literary criticisms and endless commentaries on the earlier texts in Sanskrit, a large body of literature we have tended to rather sidetrack because of the feeling that, once we move into the medieval period, it is only the Persian sources that matter. Not that I have anything against Persian sources, but I do think that this continuity from the earlier times needs to be looked at much more closely than we do. Especially the Sanskrit texts from around the sixteenth/seventeenth century, because this marks writing in the regional languages. For example, Brajbhasha became almost a court language in the region of Delhi and Uttar Pradesh by about the eighteenth century.

Periodization of this kind also cuts off what is regarded as ‘items of culture’. When we talk about Culture with a capital C, we think of temples. And the periodization is such that we tend to assume that no major temples were built after AD 1200. But when you start looking at the really huge and wealthy temples, then you realize that many of them were, in fact, built precisely in this period—in the second millennium, and very often after AD 1200. These are big temples which play multiple roles. Now, what do I mean by multiple
roles? We always think of and define temples in terms of religion—this temple is a sun temple, this is a temple dedicated to Shiva, this is a temple dedicated to Durga and so on. But I would like to say that temples have a very extensive role. First of all, what is their religious identity? That is important, of course, because they are ostensibly built for a religious purpose. The architectural style is also commented on. These two characteristics are what usually constitute the definition of the temple as an ‘item of culture’. But much else is very important: Who were the patrons? Was it always the royal family, the royal court? Or were there other patrons—wealthy merchants, for example? Local landowners? There was a variety of patronage that was important. Why do people raid temples as sources of wealth? Obviously because temples contain a lot of wealth in different forms. Where did the economic wealth of the temple come from? That is another aspect of the culture of the times and the religion of the times. What were the social discriminations that had been made in these religious institutions? Why is it that certain temples decide that only certain castes and certain communities can come into the sanctum sanctorum to worship or into the courtyard, and so on?

These items of social discrimination are tied to religious attitudes, to culture, to social history, and have to be considered as well. What this kind of periodization does is that it tends to solidify the religious identity and cuts out the religious diversity that one normally associates with the articulation of places of worship.

Cultural items can be of many kinds, but broadly speaking, there are two distinctions: abstract ideas and tangible objects. In each case, there are again two issues that are extremely important. One is chronology, the centrality of defining when a cultural articulation
occurs or when a religious articulation occurs—they do not all go back to the same period of time, much as we would like to think that everything began in the Vedic age and nothing was new. There is a great deal of innovation, of newness, that comes with history as we go along. The second thing that is important in chronology is a question of causation. Does B come out of A? Does A lead to B? Or is there no connection between the two? And this is as important in the history of religion as it is in the history of culture.

The question that has bothered me a lot and I have not been able to find an answer to it is: Were past societies also concerned about their pasts? How, for example, did the Guptas look at the Mauryas? We know how *we* look at the Mauryas, we know how *we* look at the Guptas. And then you have people saying, ‘Oh, there was a certain interest in architecture because there are pillars in the Gupta temples which imitate some of the Mauryan styles.’ Or, you have this one-off bit of literature, the *Mudranakshasa*, a play by Vishakhadatta which is all about Chanakya, and the rivalry between Chanakya and the minister Rakshasa of the Nandas. Now, this is a deliberate attempt by someone living in the Gupta age to go back to an imagined Mauryan period and write a play about it. And I keep asking myself: What are the sources he consulted? Whom did he talk to? How did he get this information? It is very interesting. I think that we have to pay a little more attention to questions such as: What did people in the past think of *their* past? It is not always what we think of the past, but we also have to ask that question, which we seldom do.

Apart from chronology, an aspect which is fundamentally—politically—important today is the identity of a culture, or the identity of many cultures. Where,
when and how does the question of identity become the framework of defining whose culture we are talking about? Identifying cultures involves recognizing patronage which is of various kinds. Again, we tend to concentrate on royal patronage when in fact there was an infinity of other forms of patronage, especially when we consider non-elite cultures or cultures somewhat distanced from what we regard as elite cultures—wealthy individuals, landowners, wealthy traders, corporate groups and guilds. For instance, the Mandasor inscription was issued by a guild; there are also references to the Ayyavole guild in South India. Both of these were supporting cultures. We also have to look at sources like this and ask: What are they telling us about the non-elites? Do we have information on the rest of society? And this, somehow, inadvertently creeps into the information about the elite sections. Does patronage change with style? Does style change with patronage? I am very struck by the fact that, in the early centuries of the first millennium, painting was largely mural painting, frescos and so on, on cave walls, palace walls, temple walls. When you come into the second millennium, to the Jain manuscripts, and later on, the Mughal period’s manuscripts, it is all miniatures, illustrating books—you do not get that interest in murals any more. Few, here and there maybe, but not such substantial interest. What changed? What led to that change?

I believe that there is a question of periodization as well as an identity. What is indigenous? There is a great debate these days in India on indigenous culture and ‘in the indigenous identity of things’—‘Is this indigenous?’ ‘Are people indigenous?’ ‘Are we Aryans indigenous?’ What do we mean by this? There is a very easy definition that is used politically, which is a
certain given territory, a boundary which is usually the boundary—interestingly—of British India. Nobody goes back to the earlier boundaries because they are much too confused and change very often, but the one present-day, stable boundary was British India, until Partition came along of course, and so the indigenous becomes that which is produced within this boundary—and one thinks of cultures and religions, Buddhism for example, as it developed in an area like Gandhara. Gandhara lay in the North-West of the sub-continent, the Indus borderlands, the Swat Valley and areas like that, bordering on the edge of what came down from the Oxus plain and then later spread into Central Asia. Gandhara was the hub of Eurasian trade, right through the first millennium into the early second millennium AD. Who were the people ruling and who were the patrons of religion and culture? The Indians, the Achamaenids, the Hellenistic groups, the Kushans, the Hunas, the Turks, the Mughals, the Mongols?

Now, in all of this, one asks: Where is the indigenous? And yet, this is a major debate in what is called hybrid art—Gandhara art, which is a mixture of the Greek, the Indian and Central Asian, and other forms of art. More importantly, it is the very hub of the beginnings of Mahayana Buddhism which plays a crucial role in the extension of Buddhism right through Central Asia into China, and from China into Japan. So, in terms of the defining of the religion, the spread of the religion, Gandhara is a key area. Yet, you cannot say this is what was indigenous to Gandhara because it was the most mixed-up area as far as population movements, political control and economic directions were concerned. It really is much more complicated. And what I find very interesting in terms of Gandhara art, because it is largely Buddhist of course, is that people
once used to say that it was the greatest art school that India had produced! Why? ‘Because it’s so Greek in its forms!’ In those days, Greek art was considered to be absolutely the best. Then you have the reactions of the nationalist art historians, saying, ‘No, this is hybrid art, it’s no good, it’s a total mixture.’ Now, there is a kind of gentle moving back to saying, ‘Well, we are not sure whether to call it the best thing or a hybrid thing. But it’s a very interesting school of art—historically provocative . . . ’

Then, there is the question of the historical method and historiography. Historians are now conscious of the fact that there are new ways of looking at the past, and as I said, even something like culture is being defined in a completely new way, partly due to the influence of archaeology and anthropology. Today, when you talk about a culture, you tend to be talking about a pattern of living rather than only about temples, mosques, mausoleums, philosophical texts, great literature and so on. You do bring in other aspects of life when you talk about culture being the pattern of living.

But in all of this—history, culture, religion and the areas that I have been talking about—there are other questions that also come up which need to be defined. If we are talking about one process that brings in new ideas and innovations, and changes society, then it is the migration of people—new people coming in and settling, and the Indian subcontinent has had an absolute plethora of migrants coming in. In a sense, the exercise that is being carried out in Assam today is a futile exercise if one goes back in history, because history witnessed migration after migration, and the Indian subcontinent is not an exception. Some people would
argue—and I think with a fair degree of sense—that history itself is often a history of migration. It is the people coming in from all over, mixing, creating cultures, creating activities, creating objects that we admire. So, migration is a very important aspect too.

How do societies change? Through two channels: one is an external stimulus, and the other is internal social evolution. The external stimulus can be migrants coming in. We talk about the ‘strangeness’ of people in the North-West Frontier—none of these people were strange because there was a lot of communication between the North-West, the Gangetic Plain and Gandhara, Bactria, the Oxus, Central Asia and so on. Partly, that is what introduced some kinds of religion into these areas. The internal social evolution is where, very often, subordinated communities are able to express themselves differently from the dominant communities, and are able to assert themselves. This is a common and constant process, and, in a sense, when one is talking about assertion and the form of elite cultures, one has to ask: What is the context in which an elite culture is asserting itself? It is not doing so in a vacuum—there has to be the ‘other’, or something to which it is reacting or favouring. And so that context becomes extremely important to any aspect of culture, be it art, literature, religion or the economy.

Now, when we talk about external elements in migrations, we have to define what agencies are involved in introducing ‘foreign elements’. We are very fond of talking about it these days. There is so much emphasis on ‘Is this indigenous to India?’ Everything that makes us uncomfortable, we say it must be foreign—‘it’s come from outside’. What do we actually mean by foreign elements in a historical sense? The
migrations of people? I have already mentioned the major migrations from Central Asia. Similar were the migrations from East Africa and the coast of Arabia. People sailed across the Arabian Sea and settled along the west coast of India as did the Arab traders. On the other side was the Tibeto-Burman influx, the Ahoms and various other people who came with them. So there has to be an understanding of who the people are that one is talking about. What is their background? What is their context? What are their aspirations? How are they using items of culture in history in order to strengthen themselves or assert themselves? Is it through trade that they are coming in? Or through invasions? We give a lot of emphasis to invasion, but, in fact, invasions are much less important—they are sudden, they are immediate, the army comes in, ravages the place and goes out. What happens subsequently is the migration of people into the region, trade routes being opened up and religious missionaries coming in. If it hadn’t been for the Turkish, Central Asian invasions of north-western India, would we have had so many Sufi groups following after, coming in, realizing that this is an area where Sufi missionary work might be successful? It indeed was extremely successful, and if there are groups coming in like that, the next question is: How did they influence the existing religion? Obviously, they were not going to influence Brahmanism. Vedic Brahmanism was safe because it was isolated. But did they have any effect on other aspects of what we call Hinduism? And what were the effects that they might have had? So, it is no longer a case of talking about Hindus and Muslims. You have to break the categories down to which sects among the Hindus and which sects among the Muslims were in communication with
each other, and what was the nature of this communication—they would not have been the same from one lot of conversations to another. Sometimes the sects are so mixed that it is difficult to identify them as either Hindu or Muslim. And when we are talking about religious missionaries, we cannot forget that the great missionary religions in Asia were Buddhism and Islam. Buddhism went to South East Asia, it went all over Central Asia—they sent out scholars (rather like the Jesuits of Catholicism) who went and lived in monasteries, translated texts, taught courses and all the rest of it. This is again something that we leave out of the discussion when we talk about religion in the late first and second millennium AD, but it is very important.

Let me return now to what I was saying at the beginning—history and culture. It begins with a fairly sharp distinction between North Indian cultures and the cultures of the peninsula. In the mid-first millennium BC, when urbanization was taking place in the Gangetic Plain, what did we have in the south? We had the Kaveri valley, we had splendid megalithic cultures which a few historians try and correlate with what was happening in the north, an understandably complex theme. The first millennium sees the development of Puranic Hinduism and the Shramanic religions as they are called. And this is something which interests me very much. Because if you go through many of the sources from the Mauryan period up to Al-Biruni, religion is usually in the form of two strands: Brahmanism and Shramanism. The inscriptions of Ashoka, for example, always talk about Brahmanas and Shramanas, and this carries on even up to the time of Al-Biruni who mentions these two sects who do not get along. So, these two strands are extremely important. When a new
religion comes in, as Islam, it comes in different forms. The Islam of the Arab traders who settled on the west coast of India was very different because it led to the emergence of distinct communities—Khojas and Bohras, Navayats and the Mapillas. It was not the same as the Islam that came in on the backs of invaders into North India. So, which groups is it in conversation with? That seems to me to be a pretty crucial question if one is talking about the interaction of religions: defining a particular religious sect and considering who they were in interaction with. It has been worked on much more by historians in the colonial period. The emergence of Hinduism as part of the Indian middle-class cultural tradition and history is much clearer because we have talked about it and discussed it to a greater extent.

My final point, of course, is the passing on of culture, or what we call culture. ‘This is our culture from the ancient period’, and then in a subdued voice, ‘This is our culture from the medieval period’—we are really not clear about this culture! So, what is it and how is it being passed on? It is not being passed on like a package from one generation to the next—it changes. Every generation adds to and subtracts from and repacks the package, takes out things, puts in new things. So where is it that we arrive at finally and what is the process by which this culture, or these cultures, these religions, these social formulations, these economic forms take the shape that they do?

Truschke. There is a lot of rich material there. Maybe if I could invite Kunal and then Anand to comment?

Kunal Chakrabarti. The basic issues with which we are going to remain this morning have already been raised by Audrey and Romila. Therefore, without going into
each of these or even attempting to do so, because Romila really touched on a very large part of the issues that concern the idea of culture, let me simply locate myself within this and say that I am a historian and I specialize in the ancient period of Indian history, and within that, one of my primary areas of interest is the history of religion. I must further qualify that by saying—the social history of religion. I do not work with theological doctrines and precepts. Within this specific area, I primarily work with Brahmanical Sanskritic texts. And therefore, all I have to say this morning will mostly be concerning Brahmanical religion and its relationship with other institutional and non-institutional religions in the pre-modern period, primarily ancient, but even later.

The reason I am calling it ‘Brahmanical’ and not the more popular, well-known term ‘Hindu’ is that the latter is a term which was invented much later—how much later is a debatable issue. For example, a large number of historians in recent years have claimed that it is actually a colonial construction, that it came from the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries, primarily in relation to the kind of cultural challenges that colonial rule brought about in India—the work of Christian missionaries for instance. Historians like Andrew J. Nicholson, for example, are attempting to push the boundary of the identity of Hinduism to about the sixteenth century—according to him, at least as far as philosophical ideas are concerned, that was when an attempt was made or a sensitivity developed to such inexplicable connections between various schools of philosophies. This that is from when one can begin to think of in terms of identified religion.

As a historian, and particularly as an ancient Indian historian, what I see is a congeries of religious cultures.
Coming to the label Brahmanism and why I use the term . . . Romila has used and partly explained the term Brahman, explained that there were two major religious groups called Brahmanas and Shramanas, and this was both indigenously known and particularly observed by visitors. The Brahmans were the priests, the authors of the religious scriptures and, by and large, the custodians of the various religious cultures that developed within the umbrella of Brahmanism. Therefore, I prefer to call it Brahmanism rather than Hinduism. Some of you may know this, but it is still worth reminding ourselves: the word ‘Hindu’ came about quite accidently.

As you know, the Arab traveller Al-Biruni first called the land to the east (because he was coming from the west) of the River Indus—Sindhu—‘Hindu’ because that is how the letter ‘Sa’ is pronounced in Arabic, and that is how this area came to be known as Hindustan. But since Al-Biruni was an extremely erudite person, he made efforts to learn Sanskrit and various other cultures that were available and left behind an extremely important text for us. In it he does not say that the religion of the Hindus is a single, unified religion; rather, he speaks of various religions. It is only from about the sixteenth century, with the coming of the Europeans, that we begin to get texts about Hindus—uninformed texts where there is an attempt to describe all the various forms, from the most animistic to the most elite, cultural and sophisticated, as part of one religion. Those fantastic images that the Hindu religion displayed and which are being described as much-maligned monsters, all of that began to come up from about the sixteenth century in European travellers’ accounts. Therefore, the term ‘Hindu’ as a collective noun, representing a group of people who
subscribe to one religious form—that is a very recent phenomenon. So, when we talk about cultures, we say ‘Brahmanical’ religious cultures. Or that’s how I look at it.

Romila also spoke about the spaciousness, the tolerance of the people who subscribed to the Brahmanical religious cultures and eventually came to be conveniently described as Hindus, using examples such as the donation of land to a west-Asian Muslim merchant to build a mosque and so on. If occasion permits, I will talk about how intolerant this Brahmanical religious culture has been and its relationship with the other most important institutional religion in ancient India: Buddhism.

Anand Taneja. There is a direct link between Professor Thapar’s work and my own. My book is about Firoz Shah Kotla, a fourteenth-century ruin that has become a sacred site—a dargah—in contemporary Delhi. And, of course, at the centre of that ruin is an Ashokan pillar. What I am going to try and do here is talk for a few minutes about the particularities of the place that I have worked on, just to be able to connect it to some of the points that Professor Thapar and Professor Chakrabarti have raised. Firoz Shah Kotla has become quite prominent in Delhi as a dargah, since the 1970s. And here the saints that are venerated are not humans but genies/jinns. The title of my book is *Jinnealogy* (a pun on ‘genealogy’ of course): *Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi*.

Why time? People have relations with the jinns and they are mentioned in the Quran; jinns are present in a lot of Islamic folklore. But the idea of them being saints in their own right, having their own dargah, this is very unusual. So, why does this become such a
prominent site in post-1970s Delhi—in post-Partition Delhi? What also began to interest me the more I began to talk to people and spend time there was the expansive sense of time that jinns open up for human beings. In the stories that people tell about jinns, whether it is in popular theological books or in oral historical narratives, the jinns—in Islamic cosmology, they tend to live much longer than humans—connect humans centuries otherwise far apart in time. In some stories, they connect Moses and Jesus to Prophet Muhammad—there is a jinn who has lived so long that he has met Moses, and he conveys his greetings to Jesus (so, he has met Jesus), and he conveys his greetings to Prophet Muhammad. These stories become prominent in post-Partition Delhi where the Islamic landscape of the city is very badly damaged, almost erased, in the violence that ensued in 1947. They also assume prominence because the postcolonial Indian state is really not interested, or has a very contested relationship (even though it is an ostensibly secular state), to its Islamic past. So, one of the things that I suggest in my book is: We cannot look at religion in isolation. There is a certain politics that people live in their everyday life, there is an experience of the politics of Partition . . . dargahs have been destroyed, mosques are no longer accessible, people have gone away . . . there is an entire landscape of memory and belonging that has been erased or is under threat, and it is at that point that you want to have this expansive sense of time and connection to the past which is disappearing from your experience of the life of the city, and that is what the jinns make possible.

So, how do we think about what religion is? How does it react/interact with politics? It is not always about claiming a certain state, it is not always about Hindu nationalism or the Islamic state. There are other
ways in which religion and politics have a strange interaction and I think we can think about those things as well.

One of the other things, as Audrey also pointed out in her introduction to my work, is that we should not think of Islam—or any religion for that matter, but I focus specifically on Islam—as just another religious identity, or only as a religious identity, as we tend to do. Rather, we should think of it as an inheritance—an inheritance that is open to people beyond our standard religious boundaries. The reason I make this argument is that I have spent a lot of time doing fieldwork in this place, interacting with the people who come here, which includes both Muslims and non-Muslims, and the predominant sense among people is that ‘Oh, more Muslims come than non-Muslims.’ Even though everything about this place is very explicitly Islamic, the language in which people talk, the vocabularies they use, the theology that informs them, whether it is Hindus or Muslims, they all talk in this way. Why do I talk about an ethical inheritance? One of the interesting things about this space is that the people who come here (and I noticed this after a few months) do not use proper names. If my name is Anand, and her name is Audrey, you make some assumptions about who we are. I sound Hindu, she sounds Christian, white—but, what happens when people stop using proper names? These are people who come to this space every week, come every Thursday, become really close friends, form social bonds, and nobody uses names. Of course, they talk to each other a lot and share lots of family secrets, people even write letters to this place where they talk about their problems with their families.

So, one of the things I became interested in is how coming to this place allows people to re-make their
lives and remake their sense of self. And of course, I began to wonder why it was this place, this Islamic place, this dargah, that makes it happen as opposed to other places. Why do they come here? And I started thinking about the logic, which is inherent in many dargahs, of garib nawaazi—hospitality to strangers. It does not matter who you are—even if you are a stranger, you are welcome. This is an idea we see in the honorific of Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer, the most prominent Sufi saint in India. He is called ‘Khwaja Garib Nawaz’. So, this idea of garib nawaazi, which is an Islamic idea, is something that Hindus, Muslims and others are using in this space—to come to this space where they can shed their social identity (our social identity in India seems to be overdetermined by families), and re-make themselves.

I’m sure all of you have heard the song from Jodhaa Akbar, ‘Khwaja Mere Khwaja’, which starts with that invocation of ‘Ya Garib Nawaz’. So, what is the distinction, then, between religion and culture when popular culture like Bollywood is constantly drawing on these religious tropes? One of the other things which I found was in the letters that people write at this shrine. The letters themselves are interesting because they are invoking an older medieval form of the shikwa which you would present to a sultan. But of course now those letters are often photocopied and have passport photos attached. In those letters there is a way in which the present and the past are in a constant dialogue. In them, people are often talking about transgressive affairs, wanting to marry someone who is from another religion or another caste or who seems to be disapproved of. This is happening at the dargah. If you look at popular Bollywood films, for example Veer Zaara where the Indian Hindu and the Pakistani
Muslim meet—where do the lovers who were separated meet? At the dargah! Even if you look at the film \textit{Fire}, which is a lot more transgressive—where is it that the characters played by Nandita Das and Shabana Azmi can first utter their desire to run away with each other? Again, at the dargah of a Sufi saint. So, there are ways in which the distinction between religion and popular culture is very porous in North India, or at least I found so from my experience of this dargah.

One more aspect to thinking about religion and its relation to the life of the city is that of ecology. Firoz Shah Kotla is a place where many animals come, and it is a place that has green lawns where people relax and like to spend time. I was trying to find precedents to this—was there ever a sacred place like this in Delhi? If you look at the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century descriptions of dargahs in Delhi, in Urdu and Persian accounts like \textit{Muraqqa-e-Dehli}, the very nature of the sacred is often connected to greenery, flowing water and the scent of flowers. It is a very ecological sense of the sacred which is connected to Delhi’s topography and Delhi’s ecology in those eighteenth and nineteenth century texts. This, of course, gets broken by the colonial state first, then by the building of British New Delhi, and much more so by the postcolonial development of Delhi after Partition when the refugees came in and Delhi expanded substantially. The connection between these traditional dargahs of Delhi, or the traditional temples, and the ecology of the city, was lost. An entire way of inhabiting a sacred landscape, an entire phenomenology of the sacred, completely disappeared—except in a few pockets like Firoz Shah Kotla which are revivified. We have the disappearance of an entire experience of religious life in the city and there has been no work on this. There has been no work in
religious studies or history to think about the ways in which people’s experience of the sacred have changed. So, what does that tell us about religion or religious experiences—and of course, ultimately, the identity of a culture that Professor Thapar mentioned? That is the question I want to return to.

If Hindus and Muslims can and continue to inhabit the same spaces and make these interactions with each other through these shared ethics, what is the identity of a culture? What is indigenous? If, as I argue, Islam is an integral part of North Indian culture, of ‘Indic-culture’, then what do we say of the distinctions that we constantly make between Indic and Islamic?

Truschke. One recurrent theme in what everyone has said is how specific aspects of the history of the second millennium in India and South Asia can challenge modern conceptions or modern ideas. I don’t know what everyone else thinks, but I feel that this is totally fine and normal, and in fact unavoidable. Just as culture is always articulated in a particular context, so too are our historical questions. We cannot take ourselves out of 2018, nor should we seek to do so. We should try to not read the past through the lens of the present such that we promote negative misconceptions, but, rather, admit our own contexts and consider how history might be relevant to us. I am thinking here about Kunal’s story of ‘Hindu’ as a term, as an identity, and how this emerges through the second millennium, then is adopted, integrated into Indian culture and society. Kunal mentioned that the earliest Sanskrit use of the word ‘Hindu’ is in the mid-fourteenth century. In the Vijayanagara inscriptions, there is mention of King Bukka I who adopted the title ‘Hinduraya-Suratana’, meaning Sultan (‘Suratana’ being a transliteration of
‘Sultan’ in Sanskrit) among the Hindurayas (among the Hindu kings).

Two things I find interesting: one, that Bukka I is claiming not to be a Hindu; he is clearly saying, ‘I am a Sultan unlike these lower Hindu kings.’ Two: it is explicitly political. We are talking about kings here, we are talking about rayas, about rajas, about sultans. We are not talking about ‘Are you going to a temple or a mosque? Who are you worshipping?’ It’s not that sort of thing. So, we have come a long way from that identity to what Hindu is usually used to mean now, and tracing that story is so important.

I am thinking of other stories as well. Romila talked about Sanskrit inscriptions and specifically mentioned the thirteenth-century inscription in Somnath where a certain trader came, built a mosque, and then for reasons that remain slightly unclear at least to me, he had an inscription made in Sanskrit about it—as opposed to an exclusively Arabic inscription. What struck me about the inscription is how non–self-conscious it is, at least as I read it. There is no sense that this is unusual—‘I am going to build a mosque, and I am going to have a Sanskrit inscription’. It seems like the most ordinary thing in the world to do! ‘People have been patronizing inscriptions in Sanskrit for temples and other places of worship for hundreds of years, why don’t I do the same?’

I would add another aspect to that storyline. I have been working recently on my third book which argues that Sanskrit texts and inscriptions sometimes have more negative depictions of Muslims—it is not always people sitting around and singing ‘Kum ba yah’! I have been working on inscriptions from the thirteenth century and the fourteenth century in particular, at
different places in India. They talk very negatively about Muslims at times, but they do not use the term ‘Muslim’ or its Sanskrit equivalent but, rather, talk about *mlechhas* and *yavanas*.

What is really intriguing are the reasons for which Muslims are criticized in these inscriptions—because they are usually not specific to the people being Muslim. The main charges that are levelled—by what we would by now call ‘Hindu’ inscriptions about and against Muslims—is hurting Brahmans, eating meat and so on. These are accusations that Brahmans in particular had lobbied against whoever was acting against them for well over a thousand years before this. This is completely non-new—it has nothing to do with Muslims in particular. These inscriptions also repeatedly mention that Muslims drink alcohol. Whether historically accurate, it is a very old criticism and it is also said without any trace of irony. Obviously, in theory, Muslims are not drinking. Not only were these criticisms not specific but also the Brahmans patronizing them could not be bothered to even make them conform to basic Islamic theology and prescriptions against the consumption of alcohol. I think that is another way to get a bit of the history of violence into our stories about the second millennium as well, which I think is important.

The last thing I would pick up on at this point is this whole question of ‘indigenous’. What is indigenous to India? My general answer to that question is: Probably nothing! In a sense that nothing is indigenous to anywhere outside of Africa (as far as I am aware). With India, we have some sense of when people first came here, maybe 50,000 years ago. Even the basic building blocks of Sanskrit were not born in the Gangetic valley, so to speak. And so, to take a step back:
instead of simply announcing ‘Nothing is indigenous’, why not ask: ‘Why does it matter?’ Why does it matter if things are indigenous to India or not? This matters in different ways for different people but it seems to me that the question is asked in the current political context in pursuit of seeking a singular narrative. The grand narrative. The Hindutva folks are always talking about this, the grand narrative of Indian history. What is that narrative and how does indigeneity seem to play a particularly crucial role there? I would argue against that narrative on the grounds of evidence (a lot of stuff is not indigenous to India), but also on the grounds that singularity is a problem. In my opinion, there is no single narrative of Indian history, nor should we be looking for one. A more honest reading of the Indian past is to see multiple narratives that overlap in some ways and do not overlap in others. And here, I think, is where historians confront a problem that perhaps we have not always been so forthcoming about. We tell stories that are not as good, narratively, as those who talk about the past in a non-historical way. A grand narrative about the Indian past may not be very unsatisfying in terms of the evidence, but it makes for a really appealing storyline. It has a clear plot, you can get into it, get behind it. I think it is very attractive in the twenty-first century. And so, as historians, we are not only fighting on evidentiary grounds, which I think we win hands down, but on narrative grounds as well, where I think we are in a much more precarious position.

Taneja. Just on the issue of narrative, I think yes, historians, anthropologists, social scientists and everyone else need to put in more attention to the narrative. I think you are making a distinction here or maybe there is a conflation of something being good and something being simple?
I think it is possible to tell a complex story very well. Of course, we all need to work on our narrative skills and present things in public and do the battle, but not without losing complexity. If we look at the classical (Indian) tradition, the cultures of encounter in the stories that have been translated, why are those stories appealing to the Mughals? Why is the Mahabharata appealing? It is an incredibly complex story in which moral ambiguity dominates. So, who is the winner, who is the loser? Why is it that Karna, who should be an arch-villain, is one of the most sympathetic characters in the Mahabharata? So, no, I think we need to work on the complexity of stories.

I think we cannot shy away from histories of conquest. And this is where Shahid Amin’s work becomes important. There are negative depictions of Muslims, as Audrey pointed out—they hurt the Brahmanas, they eat meat, and that resonance of eating meat is something that we are dealing with in the politics of now. Drinking alcohol is interesting—I think we can talk about the ways in which Shahid Amin has complicated the narrative of what counts as ‘normative Islamic behaviour’. But when he talks about conquest in the narrative of Ghazi Miyan—just to do a quick recap—Salar Masood Ghazi of Bahraich is supposed to be the sister’s son, or the nephew, of Mahmud of Ghazni, the invader. Except that he has a massive shrine venerated in Bahraich in eastern Uttar Pradesh, near the Nepal border. He is supposed to be an even better warrior than Mahmud, and stories of his raids—even though that is all in some sense impossible to prove in history—exist as popular narratives. Shahid Amin’s work is to think about the community around that shrine which includes many people we would identify as Hindus.
Salar Masood Ghazi is a Ghazi, an Islamic warrior, because he fights to save cows, not kill them. Whose cows is he saving? He is saving the cows of what we would now call ‘Yadavs’, or pastoral groups. And who are the villains in the story? The Rajputs. There are no Hindus in the story, there are particular groups. We have to deal with the history of this fact and with the contemporary reality of the fact that often those who are speaking of the Hindu identity are speaking in terms of protecting Brahman and Rajput privileges which were affected by the coming of the ‘Muslim invaders’.

Chakrabarti. Among the issues raised by Audrey, I would like to address the question of the construction of identities, especially of the ‘other’. For example, Audrey referred to the Muslims in the medieval Sanskrit inscriptions in which they have been represented in very negative and derogatory terms. This is not the first time that an ‘other’ is being represented thus. Much before the Muslims, the Buddhists have been described by the Brahmans in more or less similar, if not worse, terms because, at one particular time in history, there was a fierce competition between Brahmanical religions and Buddhism for patronage. Primarily royal patronage, but even patronage from important local landed magnets, trading communities and so on. The other reason—this is what I want to emphasize and it touches upon the question of Hindutva and the singular grand narrative that Audrey was talking about—is that the Hindu self is essentially a very ‘loose’ self. That is to say, often the Hindus had to identify themselves, define themselves, in relation to the ‘other’. If we could go back to the question of the mirror and the shadow: the construction of the self has been in relation to the construction of the ‘other’. And for a
very long period in ancient history, that ‘other’ was Buddhism. Because the two institutional religions in ancient India were Brahmanism and Buddhism. That was the real area of friction or conflict, and therefore, the question of tolerance came in.

Now, if I must spend a little time on why I think that the Hindu self is a rather loosely constructed—somewhat artificial—self, as it were. From my point of view, that is to say from the vantage point of history, there are certain fundamental problems in terms of certain essential features or characteristics of Hinduism. The first is that Hinduism is a religion without a historical founder. And in this respect, it is completely different from all other institutional religions of the world—Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, etc. Therefore, as historians, it is extremely difficult for us to decide from which point in time we begin to write the history of Hinduism. If I am asked to do a popular book on the history of Hinduism, it will be a moot point for me to decide where to begin. And that is the point when the question of the indigenous also comes in. What is indigenous? What was absolutely basic to the ethnic communities that lived in India before any of the Brahmanical religious cultures began to develop? What was before three-and-a-half millennia ago? Obviously they were practising religious cultures—what were they? How did they come to interact with the first attempt at institutional religion, the creation of institutional religion? Stemming from this absence of a historical founder is the absence of a stable canon. Now, obviously, no religion can function without a canonical mooring—it must have something irrefutable, immutable to go back to. The later Brahmanical literature, the Smriti literature, began to define the origin by
referring to the Vedic literature as that canon. The Vedists themselves do not claim so and this is a very artificially created relationship.

As you know, the Brahmanical scriptures are divided into two groups—the Shruti, the heard or revealed truth, and the Smriti, the remembered truth. The remembered truth is continuously reaching out to the revealed truth. So, from a historical perspective, Hinduism has the advantage of the truth having been revealed towards the very beginning but being lost—however, not irrevocably. Thus, continuous attempts are being made to reach out to and reinvent that truth. That is the subsequent history. And historians—Sanskritists actually—Brian K. Smith, for example—have written books such as Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion where he is arguing about six narrative strategies of going back to the Vedas, making connections, real or synthetic, but making connections to the Vedas nonetheless. Therefore, as I said, in the absence of a canon, it is a loose set of scriptures.

Religious communities, sects—these are terms being consistently used for about 200 years but they are problematic terms. When we started writing the history of Hinduism in English, all kinds of problems came up. For example, the term ‘sacrifice’, which is a conflation of both yagna and bali, or ‘caste’ which is a conflation of varna and jati. Similarly, ‘sect’ in Christianity has a completely different connotation from the sects in Hinduism. We use the term ‘sect’ as sampradaya, and that is why sampradaya and its derivative sampradaayikta (communalism) and so on and so forth. The trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva as ‘the sacred trinity’ has a very different meaning from what the term represents in Christianity.
To me, a very fundamental aspect of Hindu religious culture is the absence of a central monastic organization—that is absolutely fundamentally important to Hinduism. Think of Buddhism, what is the tri-ratna—the three fundamental, inalienable principles of Buddhism? Buddha, Dharma, Sangha or the monastic organization. And what is the role of monastic organizations in institutional religions? They train their priests. Think of the Christian seminaries—there are courses, people are inducted, they have to do the required readings, sit through exams, qualify and then get into the priestly hierarchy. Similarly in other institutional religions. In Hinduism, who is a priest? The priest’s son! And that is the reason why we see this enormous variety among the Brahmanical priests. From the semi-literate domestic priests to the enormously erudite scholar who may double up as a priest. This enormous variety is engulfed by one signifier that is the Brahmanical and the Shramanical priests. So, because of this peculiarly loose structure, there is no central monitoring agency for Hinduism. For example, to decide who is a Hindu and who is not a Hindu. What is unique to Hinduism is that it is one religion where no scriptural formulations have been made for formal conversion into this religion. In other words, if you are not born a Hindu, you cannot be a Hindu. That is, if you are born a Hindu, you can become a Muslim, you can become a Christian, you can become a Buddhist. But, if you are a Christian or a Muslim and so on, you cannot become a Hindu. At the same time, if someone claims ‘I am a Hindu’, begins to emulate the way of life of a Hindu, adopts a Hindu name (as Anand said, our names are giveaways), there is no single monastic organization to say, ‘No you are disqualified. You are not a Hindu.’
Look at the Krishna Consciousness Society which is popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement. They adopt Hindu names, adopt the vegetarian way of life, the Hindu dress, the Vaishnava religious cultures and claim themselves to be Hindus—there is no one to say with any definitive authority that they are not Hindus. So, if this is the description of the Hindu religious cultures, for it to define itself, it must necessarily have to do so by constructing a more definitive ‘other’ in relation to which the self is often defined. When you are creating an ‘other’—there are different kinds of ‘others’, of course—there is a simple recognition of difference. If you look different, if you speak a different language, your food habits are different—you eat meat, you consume alcohol—that is one recognition of difference, that is one ‘other’. There are other ‘others’, for example—equal ‘other’, inferior ‘other’; but among the various ‘others’ that you can possibly conceive, the most strident one is the external and the deviant ‘other’.

That external and deviant ‘other’ for the ancient period was primarily the Buddhists for the Brahmans; in the medieval period, primarily the Muslims and so on. Of course that is not to say that throughout the medieval period—from the thirteenth century onwards, when in many parts of India there were Islamic rules—they have been consistently described in derogatory terms. Professor B. D. Chattopadhyay’s work, for example, shows from the Deccan inscriptions of the medieval period that they have been described as a religious community very seldom, extremely infrequently—he shows that the term ‘Mussulman’ has been used only twice in the large corpus of inscriptions he was looking at. There were Yavanas, Turushkas and so on. That is to say, they were identified in terms of the
place of their origin, the languages they spoke, and so on. What I am trying to say is that there has been a consistent attempt at creating an external deviant ‘other’ because the deviant ‘other’ is the strongest oppositional category that one can possibly create. It is very important to know that the construction of the ‘other’ has been fundamental to the creation of the self for the Hindus. That is perhaps one reason why it is necessary for those who have been preaching the ideology of Hindutva to create a single community, a grand narrative, because there has been such a palpable absence of that.

One therefore realizes how artificial that attempt is. As a matter of fact, the ideals of the Hindutva are very ignorant people—I’m sorry to use a flat term like ignorant, but they indeed are. Some of them may have known some Brahmanical scriptures, but they are certainly insensitive to the history of the evolution of the religion called Hinduism, the evolutionary trajectory of Hinduism. It has always been a very fluid religion with very porous boundaries, and if you attempt to create that extremely well-defined, tight community in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’, it is completely destructive to the history of Hinduism—the very Hinduism that they are supposedly upholding.

Thapar. I am very bothered by the frequency with which we produce single examples of statements that we think apply to a larger group. I particularly mean this when we look at inscriptions and say, as we often do, that ‘the author is a Brahman and he is saying such and such about the Buddhists’ or ‘he is saying such and such about the Muslims’. I think one has to understand, one has to always ask, when we look at these sources: ‘Which category of Brahman is issuing this inscription?’—particularly in view of Kunal’s exposition of
the differences in the structure of the Hindu religion. I am struck by the extremely interesting discussion, for example, in the medieval Dharma-shastras which go into great detail about who is of a higher status—the Vedic Brahman or the temple priests. It is a fundamental distinction and it arises simply out of the fact that there isn’t a clear hierarchy.

One of the inscriptions I was referring to earlier, the Palam Baoli inscription, written by a merchant in praise of Muhammad bin Tughlaq refers to him as a mleccha. Now, this certainly does not mean a low caste, ‘other’ person—the author would not dare say that in the inscription about the sultan. So, what is he meaning when he calls him a mleccha? The context of the word becomes extremely important—you have to really go into the question of ‘What is this word being used for?’ Is it being used in the same way it is being used in the Vedas, and has a different meaning altogether from the way in which it is used in medieval times. He is foreign, he is alien, not foreign in our sense but simply alien—culturally alien. Although he is culturally alien and is a mleccha, he is to be praised for doing such and such work. So, you see, it is a different kind of meaning. And I think the contextual aspect is very important if we are going to talk about ‘Are these the views of the Hindus about Muslims?’

When it comes to the question of indigenous, of course, the whole idea has been in a sense muddied by the ideologies in the twentieth century. Indigenous is absolutely essential to the notion of the Hindu Rashtra—there is no question. The definition of Hindu in this concept is he who is born within the territory of what we call India, which is, again, British India. The definition of a Hindu is that he follows a religion that originated within the territory of British India.
Therefore, being indigenous is absolutely crucial. The debate about the Aryans being indigenous and not coming from outside—never mind the evidence from linguistics, DNA and all the rest of it—is not even a debate. Some just insist that the Aryans are indigenous. This is really tied into the question of Hindu Rashtra, and I think that this is something that we have to be very aware of as historians. In serious historical analysis, you have to keep the notions of the present at the back of your mind. I think it was Eric Hobsbawm who said that the best historians are those who are aware of the present when they are writing about the past, and I think that is a very essential feature of all historical writing.

The relationship between Brahmanism and Shramanism is quite fascinating. I am constantly quoting the passage from Patanjali’s grammar where he talks about there being two dharmanas—Brahmana and Shramana—and about the relationship between the two being comparable to the relationship between the snake and the mongoose. I think that just sums it up beautifully: that the relationship between the Brahmana and the Shramana is the competition, the rivalry, the instinctive hatred the snake has for the mongoose which is repeated in what Kunal was talking about. The Puranas are full of these dreadful people who go around in red robes—the worst things are said about them!

I am also fascinated by the fact that the Jains are attacked after the Buddhists have been kind of subdued. If you look at the literature, for example, in the Mudrarakshasa or other plays written in the late first millennium, the Jain monk is always inauspicious, he is always the butt of hatred. ‘We’ve seen a Jain monk, it means our plan will not succeed’—this is a common
attitude. Hence I am fascinated by Audrey’s work on the Jains and the Brahmans of Akbar’s court where they do not seem to have been abusing each other. Maybe they were, but not ostensibly. And I would love to know a little more about this relationship and what they were discussing about what was to be translated.

The construction of the ‘other’ is extremely important, as Kunal said. I would add that it was not just Brahmanism versus Shramanism—that is certainly how it is put in the texts and how it is read—but remember that the ‘other’ was also the avarna—the one outside caste. That is a very serious ‘other’—it is ignored because you do not bother about the avarna. The avarna doesn’t really matter, he is almost non-existent, but that is a construction which I think is very much part of the construction of the ‘other’.

The Hindu religion remains a religion of sects, to use that term since we are familiar with it. But didn’t it undergo a very major shift with the Bhakti movement which we have not fully recognized? Not simply in terms of all these preachers and teachers, but precisely in terms of structures and the construction Kunal was talking about. The Bhakti movement has historical founders, it has something of a canon. Not in every case, but each sect has texts that it goes back to and regards as absolutely fundamental to the teaching. You have to know the texts, you have to discuss those texts and be familiar with them. As a reaction to this, maybe because of the attack on Buddhism, surely the matha in some cases plays the role of the vihara? They are both celibate and non-celibate and all the rest of it, but they are organizational institutions for the propagation of religion. Of course, the one major difference which Hinduism cannot appropriate is that it cannot be a
missionary religion. Because of the caste factor mainly, but other features as well. But I think that this fundamental change that comes into the Hindu sects where you do not have a unitary Hinduism but a multiplicity of smaller sects which take on the form of a unitary religion by incorporating these features. This is an important difference between what happens to it from the first millennium to the second.

Chakrabarti. Yes, we must remember two things. One: is that it isn’t just Buddhists—I gave the example of Buddhists because the competition there was most fierce, the institutional identities more clearly etched. Usually, in the Puranic texts in which they are castigated in no uncertain terms, the term that is used is the internal critics—the nastikas. The nastikas, the lokayatas, the charvakas, etc.—that is one. And the ‘other’, particularly from the early medieval period onwards, are the tantrikas, and, more importantly, the more extreme vamachara tantra—the left-handed practices. For example, the kapalikas and so on. They are lumped together into one category who are denigrated by the Brahmans. When I say Brahmans, please be sensitive to the fact that we are not speaking of one community of people. It is a huge variety and a precisely constructed hierarchy depending on time and space. As early as 1912, a German Indologist called Wilhelm Holdfast produced a small book published by Strassburg publications, in which he wrote, ‘I have never come across a community of people who are so diverse and yet go under the same name—Brahmans.’ There is this enormous variety of the Brahmans and that is why Eleanor Zelliot wrote that wonderful book called Untouchable Saints: An Indian Phenomenon. This is one religion where untouchables are a strict no-no. At the same time, some of them
could become as venerable as the founder of a Bhakti religion. So, yes, these Bhakti religions had a historical founder, many of them created a monastery or the \textit{matha}. If they didn’t, their followers later did. Kabir, for example, had very little to do with the Kabir panthis. But the Kabir panthis later created their own canon, their own mosques, got patronage from the local zamindars, had land granted to them and so on. There are very large communities within Hinduism, for example the Sri Vaishnavas, the Veerashaivas, etc. The only difference, I’ll say, is that, over a period of time, these have been subsumed by the expansive frontiers of Hinduism as smaller sects within the same religion. No one would say that Ramana panthis or Kabir panthis are not Hindus. However they might have begun, however different their histories are from the central narrative of Brahmanism, they are still part of Hinduism.

I have a theory and I want to share it with you, particularly with you, Romila. All over India, wherever a new Bhakti or a new community arose, they eventually became a part of Hinduism except in Punjab where Guru Nanak came and then others, and created a very strongly identifiable community, became a separate religion or came to be recognized as a separate religion. My hunch is—and I wrote once that those who work on Punjab must work on this and dilate upon this—that it is because that is one major area in the Northern Indian plains where the Brahmanical penetration has been the least. That is the reason why the local Brahmans didn’t work to get it into it, and so it developed a history of its own.

\textbf{Thapar.} Since Kunal has raised the question of Punjab, I must mention that I have always intrigued by two
things. The Dalits in Punjab, of course, are segregated in orthodox Sikhism and take to the teachings of Ravi-das who was himself a Dalit. That is partly what I was meaning when I talked about the *avarnas* being the alternate ‘other’. Because you do get, in the Bhakti movement, Dalits setting themselves up as teachers, which is necessary. But the more important point that has always intrigued me—and I have not found an explanation for it—is that in every religious group in Punjab that uses the Punjabi language (and most of them do), the word for God is ‘Rab’—a good old Arabic word!

**Truschke.** Just a brief comment: I like Brahmanism as a term for ancient India. I am not so convinced, however, of its usefulness in the second millennium, and I wonder if we see that in the jump from Brahmanism to Bhakti. I think that there has to be something in-between. Brahmanism would seem to be in some sense an indirect definition of high Culture with a capital C. Bhakti is something much more diverse. What comes between these? Do we want to call it Hinduism? I don’t know, but I think there has to be some sort of broader thing there.
Shubranshu Roy. I am a student of history from Delhi, not a scholar or an expert. In the history that we have studied in school and later in college, or even later, the discourse tends to focus on what happened in the Puranas and Rigvedas: how old they are, etc. Or on what happened after the Muslims came, are the Muslims Indians, are the Afghans Indians, are the Turkmens Indians, is it east of Indus or west of Indus? There is hardly any reference to the travels and the logs of Hiuen Tsang and Fa Hien. They were dismissed in a mere paragraph or so. But according to most history books, Hiuen Tsang came to India during Emperor Harshavardhana’s rule, he came when Islam was taking shape in Arabia. If you go through his detailed descriptions, then you realize that the Hindu way of life was practised in Tashkent—there were Shiva temples, they were practising both Buddhism and Hinduism, there were Brahman priests in Tashkent, in Kashgar. But somehow we seem to have disconnected from that. When Audrey said that there are no indigenous Indians—weren’t those people really Indians? The entire Indian culture and civilization might have been there, right from central India—it doesn’t need to be defined as what the British defined India as, the land east of Indus. Why is this not a part of our education and discourse? What did these people talk about? They talked about things like Rath Yatra in Tashkent in those days. They were also worshipping Buddhist deities over there, but nobody seems to be reading those books.

Chakrabarti. I know very little about Tashkent, so I cannot speak about that. But about the presence of Brahmanical religions outside the confines of what is now
territorially called India—the best example, of course, is South East Asia. When I first read Sheldon Pollock’s exposition of the idea of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, I thought it was overdetermined. It is only after visiting South East Asia that I realized how true it is at one level. There were, in fact, very fertile interactions between what we call India today and this very large land mass called South East Asia. But why don’t they form part of our discourse? That what is part of Brahmanism was also practised—there are inscriptions in Sanskrit, there are ‘Hindu’ icons (and Buddhist, of course, to a very large extent)—they have their own individual histories. They are not part of a single history. Whenever there is a history of interaction, this comes up in a big way. Greater India is a concept that needs to be put under the microscope and seen very critically. Romila, would you like to comment?

Thapar. I think this is an extremely interesting question: ‘What did we export and what happened to it?’ And it is a question that began to interest Indian historians at the beginning of the twentieth century. But, it involved very tough work because it meant not just reading Sanskrit but also many other languages, and the matter just trickled away! And nobody today seems to be terribly interested. What fascinates me is: until about the ninth or tenth century, you have both Brahmanism and Buddhism rapidly rushing to South East Asia, establishing themselves, competing for status through royal patronage, and royal patronage is doling out vast sums of wealth to both religions. Gradually, however, Brahmanism declines and Buddhism remains. This is a very interesting question: Why is it that though both these religions were on par with each other at one stage, Brahmanism—and not Buddhism—declines by the eleventh/twelfth century? And so, today, the mainland
countries of South East Asia are Buddhist. The islands converted to Islam in Indonesia and adjoining coastal areas.

The other side, which we are even less aware of, is what happened in Central Asia. On the Silk Route, you had both Brahmanism and Buddhism travelling out from north-west India and going into Central Asia. What happens is that, in the beginning, you have the odd Brahmanical temple and the odd Buddhist monastery there. Gradually, the Buddhist monasteries become more powerful. A number of Indian Buddhist monks travel out, live in these monasteries, translate the Buddhist texts into Sogdian, into Uyghur, into Chinese, into other languages of those monastic centres and trading centres, because the main wealth comes from trade. And here again one says, ‘What happened to Brahmanism? Why did Buddhism become the predominant religion?’ Then, of course, after Islam arrives, a lot of the Buddhist territories convert and become Islamic. So we again wonder: Why is it impossible for Brahmanism to take root outside India? Which brings us back to the question of “What is indigenous?” Why were this particular group of sects (which we call the religion) limited to this part of the world, to the subcontinent? This is something that historians have yet to understand.

Something else that amazes me in this connection is that you had very learned and wise people going out as monks to these monasteries in South East Asia and Central Asia. Two things happened: a revival of learning in South East Asia, or an establishment of learning with old Javanese and Sanskrit running hand in hand; and texts being written—for instance, the most marvellous narratives of the
Ramayana. The Javanese Ramayana is very different from Valmiki’s, and even more different is the Malaysian Ramayana which brings in Allah and nabi [prophet] and everybody else coming and chatting with Ram and Ravan and what have you. It is really adopting what is thought to be a fundamental text to local, religious and social needs. And that aspect is very interesting.

On the Central Asian side as well as the South East Asian side, the Chinese travel out to Central Asia on their way to India from the fourth century AD onwards, and write copious books on their travels. Where they went, how they went, how they were received, what was the degree of Buddhism people knew, what were the texts they were reading and about all these little or not so little Central Asian kingdoms. Finally, they come to Nalanda, spend time here and go back. We have a complete textual coverage of this from the Chinese point of view from about the fourth century AD to about the tenth century, but nothing at all from any Indian. Dozens of educated Indians go there but they do not write a single sentence!

Truschke. So far the question is: Why don’t we hear about Indian things outside India? My answer is that, you do hear a lot about that, all the time. Scholars do talk about that with a great degree of frequency, just not in the way perhaps that most people expect. So, did something like ‘a Hindu way of life’ exist outside India? I’m sure it did at some place and some time, but ‘Indian’ and ‘Hindu’ are not coterminous. There are other ways to look for things that originate in India, outside the sub-continent. For example, think about Indo-Persian poetry or Indo-Persian translations of Sanskrit texts into Persian. What happened to those? Did any of that material get back to Iran? Some of it did, but not very
much. The Persian *Razmnama*—a translation of the Mahabharata from Sanskrit into Persian—is printed today out of Tehran, not out of India. So things did make it back even though they were not necessarily ‘Hindu’ or at least not exclusively ‘Hindu.’

Also, I would introduce the terminology of South Asia versus India, and that is not because I like it but many scholars do use the term ‘South Asia’ or ‘South Asian’ as opposed to ‘India’ or ‘Indian’. I don’t like ‘South Asia’ in some ways because it is a ‘social science’-like term—it is a creation of the cold-war world and post–cold-war world. I don’t like that sort of newness of it. But I do like ‘South Asia’ insofar as it separates out the modern nation-state of ‘India’ created in 1947, whereas what came before need not be subsumed within a nationalist reading of the past. I think shaking up our terminology can help us resist the push towards a nationalist narrative, which I think is a push that we all feel even if we want to resist it.

**Chintan Girish Modi.** What would this discussion be like if we introduce the category of faith in addition to religion, and what would anthropology and history have to contribute to that discussion? I am thinking here especially of the work of Jurgen Wasim Frembgen—a German, he was born into Christianity, then embraced Islam and then wrote an ethnographic study of the pilgrimage to Lal Shahbaz Qalandar shrine. What is it like when a scholar talks about their own practice and their own faith when they are writing about religion? What are the gains and challenges in that scenario, as opposed to this discussion where we are talking about practices, beliefs and religious structures of people out there—but we don’t really have to put ourselves in that discussion?
Taneja. I am going to start with a sh’er—‘Meer ke din-o-mazhab ko puchhte kya ho un ne to/qashqa kheen-cha dair mein baitha kab ka tark islaam kiya’. I am not just being flippant by quoting Meer and saying ‘Why are you asking me about religion and my sect? I have put on the qashqa and sat in the temple’. What Meer tells us is that, in the eighteenth century when he was writing it, the possibility of embracing what seemed like ‘otherness’ outside the confines of one’s social and religious identity was real. The ‘other’ existed not only as an antagonist but also as a possibility for the self.

This is a trope that keeps coming up in Urdu poetry. How does faith influence our reading and our understanding of what is objective humanity in social science research? And how does the idea of faith work for my fieldwork? So far, we have talked a lot about religion, but we have not talked about faith. So let me start with the ethnographic thinking about the ‘other’—the person who is not me, whom I am talking to, and then bring it back to the ‘self’.

When I was doing fieldwork, the question of faith—or what in Islamic terms would be aqeedat—didn’t really come up. What came up was maan-na—to believe, and, more importantly, lagaav or mohabbat—attachment and love, respectively. People seemed to have a very intimate relationship with the saint or saints of Firoz Shah Kotla, based on various kinds of encounters, most often, dreams. A figure in your dream tells you something—that is a figure of inspiration, that is a figure of dream. That is not something social science deals with very well. Does that mean it is not an integral part of human experience? It is! And I think what we need to do is to start to think of that as people’s religious experience instead of as rationality, and the
ways in which that is actually often transformative in their lives.

What do these dreams refer to? This is where history might have to come in conversation with psychology, and anthropology needs to be in conversation with theology. To think about the ways in which certain aspects of the past or history also manifest themselves through dreams. Taymiya R. Zaman, a historian, has recently written an essay in *The American Historical Review* about this: What does it mean for me to be a believer and yet study history? What are the ways in which I have to distance myself to produce a certain kind of work?—and you have to disassociate yourself from being a religious person to be allowed to say a certain kind of thing. Your objectivity is immediately in question. Can I be a good historian? Can I be a conscientious historian and also be a believer? This is an important question and one we need to pay attention to. Otherwise, we leave the field open to—let’s just say the word—the Hindutva-wallas, who often have a political project as their idea of Hinduism as opposed to a certain kind of lived relationship to the faith. So, it is not an answer, it is a series of suggestions to take things further.

Truschke. I am asked about the relationship of my personal religious disposition to my work with some frequency and it is not a topic that much interests me, so I decline to comment on it. But I am much more interested in general assumptions grounded in Protestant thought that we all share. This comes out more powerfully in the United States, where I live, but it probably comes up here as well. As I emphasize to my students, you don’t need to know anything about the Bible or be a Christian in order to have embraced some basic
Protestant presumptions, such as the idea that monotheism is better than polytheism, the idea that religions need to have a single book, and, perhaps above all, the idea that religion is in fact about faith, that it is about an internal disposition. These are Protestant-based assumptions that were not always present in Indian society before the colonial period. And, I think, once we recognize this set of preconceptions that many of you share regardless of where you go and pray, or, whether you do or don’t, that can open up new ways of thinking about religion in India’s past.

Chakrabarti. The texts that I work with are mostly prescriptive texts where you are being asked to be faithful. From that, it is difficult to deduce what faith exactly is. We begin to get a testament of faith from about the medieval period, from the literary product of the great Bhakti saints. Much earlier in the South. In the North, from about the medieval period. The translations of these texts give you an idea of what is meant by intense, selfless surrender to God, a matter of faith. Those of you who may not be familiar with the original vernaculars, you could read the excellent translations by A. K. Ramanujan, for example. But that is one kind of faith, the faith of a practising saint. When somebody is asked to practise a set of rituals. For example, the vratha, vows to visit centres of pilgrimage, teertha and so on—people are performing them on a regular basis, undertaking penances, inflicting pain on their body, getting into a temporary renunciatory mode. But what do these mean? That is actually the anthropologists’ domain. Unfortunately for us who work with ancient Indian texts, we have very little to go by. But, yes, I am curious about what it is that compelled them to make that commitment and undertake that renunciation.
Audience Member 1. I am a student of social anthropology as well as a student of history. And I think I am in the most confused state ever! I am always in a dilemma about what I should follow as an anthropologist. One of the biggest problems I find is applying social anthropology in reframing history, or reframing religion. I think as anthropologists we face this problem every day. We don’t know how to frame religion on the basis of people’s perspectives, and, at the end, there is ancient history waiting for us, to criticize us. So it is an entangled and very complicated matter. As anthropologists, we always try to put people’s perspective first, and then think about the scriptures. To be very honest, when we talk about religion, we cannot ignore the scriptures. On the other hand, in the modern world we live in, we cannot leave out people’s perspectives either. So, how do we arrive at a compatible and happy bond between these two perspectives?

Taneja. I don’t think I will be able to give you a good answer without knowing the specificities of your fieldwork. The methodology of sociocultural anthropology is ethnographic fieldwork: you go and spend time with people—you spend a lot of time—until you begin to understand the way they understand the world, and it unsettles the categories you bring. For example, working at Firoz Shah Kotla, the ideas of Hindu-Muslim and the easy divides between them were completely unsettled. Ideas of past, present, how people relate to history—completely unsettled. That unsettling is the primary thing that we do, and then bring that to existing debates, existing literatures. Rather than applying the ideas we are picking up from anthropology, it is the people we are talking to who allow us to question, challenge and broaden what our definitions of categories are.
Coming to how this relates to the texts: this is something that I have actually worked with a lot—through people who talk to and have a relationship of veneration to jinns. Is there a South Asian precedent to this? When you begin to look for a precedent, you may not find it in the ‘usual religious texts’. In my case, I found it in rekhti poetry, a genre of Urdu poetry in which men write in women’s voices, claiming that they are recording the lives of women. Like [Sa’adat Yar Khan] Rangin who claimed to have invented the genre in the late eighteenth century, and who said, ‘I am just documenting the lives of women I know and setting them in verse.’ Twenty per cent of his diwan is about women’s relations to jinns and fairies. You can trace that back to the Quran and other aspects of the Islamic tradition, except that it is not a straight-line transmission in the manner of what one sheikh is saying to the next sheikh. There is, rather, a popular reworking and remaking of ideas that are present in the Quran. Of course, you constantly have to be aware of the interplay of politics and history and everyday life, and that is what anthropology does.

**Audience Member 2.** My question follows from the last one about teaching history in schools. What we end up teaching is almost a grand narrative-driven event, incident–ruler-driven narrative—there is very little about cultural materialistic approaches. Which is why I found it so interesting that most of this conversation draws on evidence from inscriptions. Sadly, we have not found a way to insert that into the school syllabus. So I was wondering if you had any suggestion as to how, when we are dealing with multiplicity of cultures, do we deal with that in tight frames of curriculum?

**Thapar.** Dealing with the multiplicity of cultures is certainly tough, but I think you have to sort them out.
I don’t mean do a typology or a characterization, but sort them out in terms of: Whose cultures are these? What are the practices? What are we actually dealing with here? What is the agency through which the culture is being promulgated and what is the purpose? I think these sort of questions would help you to do a kind of cross-cultural analysis of multiple cultures, which is really what you want. Because if you study them individually, you have a bouquet of cultures and you don’t know what to do with this bouquet, especially if the fragrances are different. But if you do that kind of cross-cultural analysis, it might give you some idea of the interrelationship between those cultures. For example, talking about the relationship between Brahmanism and Buddhism, we should also look at the interrelationship between Vaishnavism and Shaivism, and their construction of each other. These are as interesting and as revealing as the construction of the definitive ‘other’, the external deviant ‘other’ and so on.

**Truschke.** A practical tool I use in my college courses when I do an overview of South Asia is that I sometimes teach the same period twice, using two different models. First, I would do, say, Indo-Islamic political history, covering the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughals. That is our classic ruler-driven narrative that emphasizes kings, like Muhammad bin Tughlaq, Akbar, and so forth. Then, I would go back and cover the same period of time by looking at Sufism. So, there are a couple of big Sufi moments that happen: people coming into India, centres being set up in certain places, and so on. The downside of this approach is that you can end up with the illusion that the two storylines are disconnected. Of course it is not so. I don’t do this for all periods of South Asian history, but I do find that an exercise like this can jar students out of thinking—’Oh, it’s all
about who is sitting on the throne in Delhi’, when there is so much more going on.

Taneja. Having been a student of history in Indian classrooms, it was extraordinarily political. It is all a history of what happened, what happened, and what happened. Especially after you stop talking about the ancient period. So, is there a way we can broaden the conversation between/beyond a kind of teleology of politics and the nation-state? I wonder if getting people involved in more localized exploratory ideas of history might be beneficial. Just now, while we were having a discussion over coffee, someone talked to me about how just talking of the history of his own family really problematizes the category of Hindu. So why not do that in the classroom and open it up for discussion? And have an exploratory and discussion-based model which is very much rooted in the local, like there are things in Calcutta, Delhi, in places in-between, where there is an enormous amount of local history. We should be pushing people to explore that local history by themselves rather than simply memorizing names and dates. Of course, that requires a completely different model of how history is taught and who decides what the syllabus is, and I don’t know if we are capable of doing that in the current political dispensation.

Audience Member 3. The first question is: If the relationship between Brahmanism and Buddhism was so antagonistic, how did the nature of that relationship change? When we look at it today, we don’t see that kind of an antagonistic relationship any more. The second question is: We have been saying that Brahmans are a very small group or a small sect, at least that is what I understood from the conversations. If that is the case, then how did such a small group acquire this kind of
power or hold for itself from the very early times or
the ancient period?

Chakrabarti. At the level of institutional identity, there
was a very fierce competition—that doesn’t mean that
from the very beginning there wasn’t an exchange of
ideas. For example, the Buddha was born into an intel-
lectual milieu which was distinctly Upanishadic, and he
imbibed a great deal from that. As Buddhist philoso-
phies and the Brahmanical schools of philosophies
developed, they interacted continuously, as did those
who worked with such traditions, Wilhelm Holdfast
for example, gave an account of the intellectual inter-
action between the two. The two major schools of
Buddhist philosophy—Madhyamaka and Yogachara—
deeply influenced some of the so-called Sikh schools
of Hindu philosophy. So, on that level, interaction was
continuing despite fierce competition for patronage,
the question of identity and the construction of the
‘other’. By the way, I have been speaking primarily
from the point of view of Brahmanism, because these
are the texts I am more familiar with. There wasn’t an
almost equal attempt to define themselves, stave off
these attacks from the Buddhists’ side, neither was there
a reciprocity of symbolic violence that the Brahmanical
religion performed on Buddhism. So, obviously a lot
was going on in that sphere, but there was also that very
strong intellectual tradition where there was give-and-
take at a very fundamental level.

Of course, there are certain landmarks, as it were,
in the trajectories of this relationship—for example,
Shankaracharya, the ninth/tenth century and so on.
From about the fourteenth century, the hagiographies
of Shankaracharya began to come in, so we get to
know about his digvijayas—victory tours. He had been
engaging the Buddhist philosophers in public debate
and defeating them, and was, in a manner of speaking,
reasserting the supremacy of Brahmanism-like
Shaivism, because he was a Shaiva. So, that is one iden-
tifiable landmark if we construct a trajectory of the
relationship. Part of the larger and complex history of
that same relationship is the question of what happened
to a very large community of Buddhist lexchies, what
its relationship with the Brahmanical religions was,
what was the nature of their interaction. Then, after
Buddhism more or less disappeared from the Indic land,
as it were, what remained were the ideas. Of course,
what also remained were the institutions, martyrs for
some time—which, due to lack of patronage and var-
ious other factors, went into decline. But what certainly
remained were the ideas, and a time came when they
became indistinguishable from the set of ideas which
were closely articulated by the Brahmanical philosophers.

Thapar. Let me give you a worm’s-eye view which is
rather different from what Kunal was doing—he was
quite correct, but I feel that there is another view as
well, that relates to the question of faith and religion.
As I see it, faith is something very individual. Each indi-
vidual does or does not have faith, and the nature of
the faith that that individual has depends very much
on the individual. And I would bring in the psycholo-
gist, the social anthropologist, the historian and the the-
ologist, because I think that is extremely important to
the study of faith and to the understanding of faith. The
other side of religion is partly dependent on faith. You
have to have some degree of faith in order to follow a
particular religion, but it also involves a study of the
social institutions that arise in the name of that religion.
Whether they be monasteries, chaityas, stupas and the
worship at these, whether they be temples, pathashalas or gurukuls or whether they be mosques, khanqahs, madrasas—these are institutions that organized religions have for socializing their followers into a particular kind of society that they think is the ideal society. That institutional side, the socializing of people into institutions, I think, is a very important aspect of religion which has a bearing on the influence of religions on society.

Let me illustrate this by saying that what is interesting is, of course, the dialogue between Brahmanism and Buddhism in the early period when they were equally matched, or when Buddhism was better off before it gradually declined. There are two sides to the control that these religions have—one is the question of superstition and astrology. I think that is extremely important to the hold that certain kinds of Brahmanism in particular had on royal families. We find that in the Indian tradition—I think it was in your book, Audrey, that you talked about Aurangzeb’s astrologer Ishvaradasa. There is a whole tradition of Brahman astrologers who are attached to Mughal rulers and presumably this goes back to earlier times. It is the same with the Brahman element in the South East Asian royal kingdoms. It is the astrology aspect which was extremely important to the royal family and was a very strong tie between Brahmanism and the royal families. Now this is just one aspect, but we cannot ignore it because it is an aspect that touches on both faith and religion—even if in a peculiar way.

The other very important aspect is, of course: How did these religions manage, control or involve themselves in the economy of that period? We now have studies of Buddhist monasteries, Gregory Schopen’s studies, for example, of Buddhist monasteries being
deeply involved in commerce and trade. They are staging points along trade routes, they are investors, and they act as financial banks, and there is evidence coming through all the manuscripts that are found on the Central Asian trade routes that many of the Buddhist monasteries were commercially absolutely crucial to the traders. Now I am not suggesting that there is an economic basis to everything religious, but there is that side to the institutions of religion that we cannot ignore and have to understand.

Similarly, it is quite interesting that the rise of Brahmanism in a substantial way occurs after the Gupta period—the late first millennium AD going into the second millennium, when the maximum number of grants of land were given to Brahmans. The Brahmans are, in fact, much more dominant as recipients of handsome grants of land. If you look at the Chola economy, for example, where detailed studies are being done, it has been argued that, during the Chola period, the Brahmans as a whole virtually controlled the economy because they had very strong investments in commerce as well. So, I think these are aspects which we cannot ignore because these aspects financed, organized and helped expand the institutions that religions established as institutions for socialization. They may have stopped at some point to merely socializing and actually become economic institutions, but they have remained important and need to be looked at.

**Abhishek Chakraborty.** I am a student of peace and conflict studies. Coming back to the question of the idea of indigenous culture of India, don’t you think that our mixed culture is actually our indigenous culture? Just to explain the matter—there is an inherent culture among the Bengali Muslims in Bengal as well as in Bangladesh, where they say ‘Paye hath diya salaam karo’,
which means ‘touch the feet of the elder and do salaam’—prostrating in front of the creation rather than the creator itself. So don’t you think this mixed culture, which had been indigenous, can be the source or resolution of conflicts?

Chakrabarti. Yes, obviously there has been so much give-and-take, particularly in certain regions at given points in time, that it is difficult to claim exclusivity. Therefore, the kind of syncretism that eventually comes out of this relationship may demand a different denomination. Call it indigenous, or what have you. For instance, the example that you took of the Bengali Muslims—fortunately, a lot of work has been done on them and therefore I need not speak for them. As late as the census of 1901, Richard Eaton writes, when someone was asked ‘What is your religion?’ in the enumeration of his identity markers, the response was ‘I am a peasant.’ The reason, of course, is that the identifying characteristics of Islam were not very strongly imbibed by a very large number of Muslims in Bengal, and that is one area where the study of Islamization has been done by Eaton. This is a major question in Indian history.

Almost all over the world, wherever Muslims ruled over an extended period of time, if not the majority, a very large number of people have been converted to Islam—except in India. But there are pockets, for example Eastern Bengal which is now Bangladesh, which became overwhelmingly Muslim, and Eaton actually shows the historical process of the extension of the frontier through which the particular socio-economic underpinnings of that, the ecology of that movement and all of that has been discussed. But the most important thing is that these people, the local peasants and primarily fishermen of this very swampy,
low-lying area, where land had to be reclaimed in order to start wet rice cultivation, had imbibed a combination of popular cultures. One of the most important elements of that has been the epics, which once Romila had described to me as ‘the two most important civilizational texts of India’. And as A. K. Ramanujan once said in an article, ‘It [the Ramayana] is so pervasive, that an Indian doesn’t really have to read it in order to learn.’ They imbibe, as it were, almost through a process of osmosis. So, these were obviously very well known to the Muslim peasantry in Bengal. That you get to know from literature, you get to know from sociological studies, and that explains the importance of the Wahabi movement in Bengal to bring about pure Islam. The Faraizi Movement too, which is almost particular to Bengal, to revive pure Islam. The popular element, or indigenous, if you want to call it. It doesn’t matter what label you give it, but there was a very strong intermixture of popular cultures at the grassroots level—there is no doubt about that. The Bengal Muslims are a very good example of that.

Truschke. Might I just add as a footnote on the Indian epics—I think that one really crucial point about them that many people have made is that these are not exclusively Hindu epics. We have Jain versions, we have Buddhist versions earlier on, we also have Persian versions. The Ramayana, for example, was first translated into Persian in the late 1580s at the court of Akbar, the Mughal emperor, and thereafter, there was an explosion of Persian Ramayanas over the next 200 years. There are over two dozen discrete Persian versions of the Ramayana story that still exist, many of them dedicated to Mughal emperors including Aurangzeb. So you have this mixture of high and low cultures, stretching across religious boundaries, as it were.
Thapar. I think your question also raises the issue of, to be absolutely blunt, the Muslim migrants. Are they all migrants? All Muslims? Or are they local converts? We tend to say that Muslims are migrants, they are foreigners, they are aliens because we only look at the elite groups where there were Turks, Afghans, Mongols, Mughals and Arabs—a few of them actually, but nevertheless. If you look at the majority, they are Indians who converted. Now, what does conversion mean? Normally, you have a religion that converts and says that the person converting forgets about everything else, obliterates their earlier religion. However, if you are converting by caste, as it seems to have been the case with Islam, then those caste practices and mythologies inevitably continue into the new religion. You’ve been brought up on those, generations of your family have been brought up on those myths and practices, they continue. The proof of this is partly, again, what many of the orthodox Persian texts of the eighteenth century say—their objection is to all these lower-caste Muslims who joined in Holi and Diwali and celebrated them with all the others who were doing so. So there is a fair amount of celebration among Muslim castes as well—lower castes particularly.

The second thing, of course, is that you have a strong *avarna* section in Islam—a strong Dalit section in Islamic society. The *pasmanda* Muslims are after all Dalits and are kept alienated and segregated. Now, this is a very complex separation vis-à-vis conversion. It is not an ordinary conversion and I think it is something we need to study much more.

Taneja. Of course the idea of indigenous culture which is a mix of cultures should be promoted because it complicates the very easy binaries that we have, but I don’t think we can stop there because that also has the
implicit idea that this is syncretic, this is Indian, hence it is good, it is still us. For example, the RSS uses that idea to promote the concept of the good Muslim versus the bad Muslim. So, they will promote someone like Raskhan who used to write Krishna Bhakti bha-jans—as a good Muslim. But if you don’t do that, you are not ‘integrating’, you are a bad Muslim. This idea of syncretic culture is important, we should promote it in the North, so we talk about Ganga–Jamuni Tehzeeb. What I am trying to say is, coming back to the point Romila made earlier when she was talking about the Palam Baoli inscription where Muhammad bin Tugh-laq is a mleccha: he is a sultan but he is also a foreigner. We really need to come to terms with foreignness as an integral part of what we are. Islam and Christianity bring foreign things, they bring different sets of ethics, they bring different understandings of morality, they bring different theologies and people choose them. People have voluntarily chosen them through generations. So, that foreignness adds to whatever it means to be Indian and we should, instead of being ‘nationalist’, have a more cosmopolitan understanding. Someone is a stranger, someone is bringing new ideas and different ideas from outside—we have something to learn from them. This is why people have turned to those ideas and this is the basic idea of historical respect for conversion. People made rational choices or at least some kind of choice, which is to be different from what they were. We need to really come to terms with that and understand that. You need cosmopolitanism, in [Immanuel] Kant’s sense—you need to welcome and learn from a stranger rather than nationalism.

Truschke. This ‘being foreign’ versus ‘being Indian’ division, that you can’t be foreign and indigenous, I think,
is really a modern construct. For instance, the Mughals did not refer to themselves as Mughals but generally as Timurids and that was because they traced their lineage back to Timur. Timur was not Indian, but tracing their lineage to Timur gave the Mughals—in their opinion—claim over the Indian subcontinent because Timur had sacked Delhi. So in this sense, claiming to be Timurids was a claim to be both foreign and to have a claim to India. It was not a conflict, it was a confluence.

Chakrabarti. Since your question was specifically about Bengal Muslims, I responded in that way but this is true of all these institutional religions which came to India, definitely as Anand said, as outsiders. Christianity, for example. Historian Tapan Raychaudhuri writes in his autobiography that his family had land and a few subject peasantry, some of whom had converted to Christianity. They called themselves *romai cathics* (Roman Catholics) but most vigorously participated in Kali Puja—the annual worship of Goddess Kali in Bengal—that coincides with Diwali. So when he, as a child, asked them, ‘How come you are so enthusiastically participating in Diwali?’, their surprised response was: ‘We have given our religion—does it mean that we have also lost our social identity?’ Now the Bengali word ‘jaath’ should be translated as ‘caste’, but it is not caste—it is a broader social identity.

Vanschica Kant. This is going to be on a more macro level: I want to know your view on culture and geography. Obviously, for anybody studying ancient history, the focus of studying spaces, places and people is mostly the northern part of India, the movement and migrations from Central Asia to the north-west and the movement towards the east, the rise of civilizations and
so on. But the coast and the southern part of India only come in a little bit around the megalithic period and then, of course, the dynamic and vibrant period of the Sangam Age. So, I would like to know how culture and geography impact notions of identity, items of culture and how then technology comes in. How do you see all three interacting?

Truschke. You are right, many tend to talk about North India first; South India and the coasts come later. To me, one lesson of this is the limits of history and the limits of a single historian. History and historians cannot tell you everything about the past. In fact, we only tell you about little slivers of the past, in-between which there is a certain curtain drawn across dark areas. One way to deal with that is that we need to be forthcoming about what our evidence is, and what it shows and does not show, within the limits of what we know. I often tell my students that historians work in terms of degrees of certainty, not absolute truth. Other than the names and dates of some key people, everything else is subject to questioning and debate. Some facts are pretty certain, but others are best described as probably, and still others are ‘up in the air’ — who really knows! I think this is also the reason to perhaps talk less about India and Indian civilization as a monolithic ‘mega’ thing and to talk a little bit more precisely in terms of regions and specific groups.

Thapar. Where does one begin? I would have said that there was a time when historians had a rather limited view of history as suggested in some of the earlier books. Partly because you cannot, as Audrey said, cover the whole history of every aspect of every little inch of the subcontinent. You have to pick and choose. So, historians pick and choose, and you judge the historians by what
they pick and choose and how they justify their choice. That is one aspect of it. The other aspect is that the reverse is also happening now in history, in the sense that the interconnections between activities are being recognized to a much greater extent. So, if you are talking about migrants coming in from the north-west, or even the migration from central to south India, you have to go into questions like: What was the ecology of these two regions? What was the economy of these regions? What drove the migrations? Who were the people who migrated? Was it everybody that migrated? Which groups migrated? What did they aspire to at the end of the migration? Where did they settle? How did they react to the areas where they migrated and how did the people who were already in those areas react to them?—(this is a question we seldom ask)—we always talk about the migrants coming in, but we seldom say ‘and so the local people reacted like this’ and you have to add that to it as well. So really, by the time you finish, you have to pick and choose. Because one historian cannot handle all these areas and all these different questions in any kind of meaningful way. You have to say that there are certain trends which seem to you to be much more valuable in understanding what happened in the past.

Taneja. In terms of teaching, we have had a certain geographically bound model of what India and Indian history is. [Finbarr] Barry Flood in his book *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval “Hindu–Muslim” Encounter* talks about ‘roots’ that can be defined more clearly by ‘routes’. So, instead of thinking about places being ‘rooted’ in the soil, think about the ‘routes’ through which ideas, people and material objects travel. Thus, to think of India as not just the nation-state and not even just the subcontinent but as a set of intersect-
ing geographies, movements. For example, there is the Sanskrit cosmopolis that we talked about which includes India, parts of South East Asia and even parts of Central Asia at some point—so India was part of that. This is a larger geography of which we can talk, or we can talk about what Shahab Ahmed has recently called ‘the Balkans-to-Bengal complex’. From the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, where he is talking about the Balkans, the westernmost part of the Ottoman Empire, to Bengal, the easternmost part of the Mughal Empire, this area for over 500 years is interconnected through the movements. It is never exclusively a Muslim world, but interconnected with the movement of goods and people, and Persian high culture. Or, we can talk about the Indian Ocean world which connects east African coast and Arabia to the coast of India and to South East Asia. So I think we should expand in our teaching, we should explore the kind of rootedness/routedness of Indian history, and think of all the ways in which we have always been connected to these different networks of movement.

**Audience Member 4.** Rabindranath Tagore in his novel *Gora* talked about diversity and his ideas about India and cultures in India. It is about the question of diversity that we heard from all of you so far. What is the role of dissent and dissenters? This is so important today in light of what we have heard and what Rabindranath wrote in *Gora*.

**Chakrabarti.** The role of dissent is a fundamental one. I would definitely ask Romila to talk about it, because she is the one who has talked about the renunciatory tradition so much. Some of this is part of the larger recommended processes of life-cycle rituals, for example, the Ashrama system. But in many cases, these are
rebellions. The Bhakti groups often began as dissenters. It depends on the manner in which this dissent has been articulated. There are certain dissents which are expanded, there are certain others which are accepted within the larger fold, and over a period of time are absorbed into the larger, very spongy appearance of Hinduism. Hinduism is so fluid that I can almost describe it as an amoeba. It just inflates itself, then divides and so on. So, there is definitely a space for dissent, but renunciatory tradition is only one of them, the Bhakti tradition is another and it goes on.

There is also the question of opting out of the religion, which would not necessarily accept another institutional religion, say, a votary of Brahmanical religion converts into Buddhism. One can become a tantric, one can become a lokayata, a nastika and so, all of these are either individual or group dissent. Certain dissent groups always lived on the margins of Hinduism—neither as part of the other institutional religions nor accepted by Hinduism. So there are various articulations of dissent. You said diversity of the religion, I am saying diversity of dissent.

**Thapar.** Diversity is not sufficient, you have to say that there is also dissent. Because dissent is not automatically included in diversity. Diversity can be very positive all the way but be just a little different here and there, whereas dissent is a definite position that is opposed to just being diverse. I think that one of the conspiracies of modernization in India during the colonial period was to downplay the notion of dissent in Indian civilization as it was then described. This downplay was partly because the Indian literati was very anxious to show that there was no dissent, that it was all harmonious, peaceful and that everybody agreed. And perhaps
the colonial power was anxious to avoid the notion of
dissent because that would have led to all kinds of com-
plications in terms of the relationship between the
colonial power and the colonial people. You do not
encourage dissent by referring to dissent in your culture
if you are ruling that way.

Dissent has been, in fact, a very important aspect
of Indian culture and it is important in two ways. One
is in the figure of the renouncer—the Indian
renouncer, I think, is almost unique in world civiliza-
tion. He appears occasionally in Christianity, but it is
not the same as the Buddhist, the Jain, the ascetic and
the Brahmanical traditions. Here again, the renouncer
is not a single category, it is a world in itself. So what
we really need to do is a very serious study of the
whole span of people who are renouncers and sects that
were renunciatory sects. Some were very extreme, went
often into isolation and really made themselves socially
negative because they did not come back and do any-
thing to the society—they just disappeared! The other
lot of people joined a comfortable monastic order. They
also did not do very much to society because they
joined an alternative system—they opted out. So, what
is it about dissent? At different periods in time when
there was dissent, what role did it play? That is the fun-
damental question which still has to be answered. Both
at the philosophical level and at the literal level of how
society worked.

The fact is that there was an acceptance of dissent
naturally in the orthodox texts of both the Brahma and
the Buddhists. Dissent is not underlined—it would
not be because conservative orthodoxy refers to dissent
but dismisses it in every religion, in every ideology
almost—it is the same with the Buddhists. King Ashoka
is very interesting because he calls for everybody respecting the other person’s sect, but when it comes to the Buddhist traditions, the Buddhist sangha, he says to the sangha, ‘You are to observe the following rules or behaviour, you are to read these texts’, and if there is dissent, the dissenting monks are to be dressed in white and banished from the monastery. Now I find that a very interesting contradiction in a man who is, in fact, said to be supporting tolerance and lack of dissent to the extent that we have made an icon of him. But I am much more impressed in some ways with the texts of the fourteenth century. The Sarva-Darshana-Sangraha, for example is a text which puts together all the philosophical schools that existed at that time and starts off by saying, ‘My opening chapter is a long chapter on the Charvaka system. I do not believe in the Charvaka system, I do not accept it. But since other people do, I am discussing it at length.’ The first chapter is on dissent, then it carries on with the other philosophical schools. I think that that is the kind of attitude we need now. You do not have to believe in a particular notion of dissent, but you should be determined to discuss it, understand it and explain it to others because it is important to your way of thinking.
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‘Curating’ appears to be one of the trendy words at present—we hear about the curation of cuisines, the curation of home décor, the curation of fashion and couture, the curation of popular music and public art. Curation appears as a synonym for any kind of careful crafting or arrangement, although the reflexivity which the practice encourages remains masked in its rampant publicity.

Culture, however, is no longer broached as a worthy topic of ‘discourse’ by the disciplines among the social sciences—the foremost being social anthropology—which virtually rose to prominence by theorizing about this concept. Yet, the practices through which culture is curated encourage a reminder of the views of Clifford Geertz who had defined culture as the ‘webs of significance which man himself has spun and finds himself suspended in.’ Geertz had provided perhaps the best conceptual tools for thinking about culture at a time, we now know, when culture was receding from the horizons of anthropological theories. He offered empirical reasons for rejecting the theoretical universalization of culture as a complex whole and of the
operational and methodological dogma of contemporary functionalist definitions by cautioning anthropologists to remember that ‘although one can move between the forms in search of broader unities, societies—like lives—contain their own interpretations.’ When we undertake an attempt at the curation of culture, we are inevitably drawn towards Geertz’s injunctions to undertake a ‘thick description’ which, according to him, helps us understand what ethnography actually means. Because it is only by scrutinizing the biases that lead to our interpretive methods that we are able to understand the manner in which we often transform ideational concepts into visible, tangible and valid evidence. Curation, in relationship to culture, allows us to focus upon methodology; and in regarding curatorial imperatives, we attend to the seminal methods through which we create notions of evidence.

This brings us to consider the manner in which evidence is constituted, especially through methods of visualization. In this respect, archaeology’s visual histories are extremely rich sources for gauging the ontological fashioning of an absent past. Given that archaeological knowledge is anchored upon transcriptions of sight, field photography and field drawings are carefully undertaken to exhibit the undertaking of an objective science. Yet, quite akin to research within the observational sciences, archaeology too has largely stayed away from interrogating the epistemic force of vision. For example, photography has been extensively used within archaeology for showing analogies as valid evidence, yet the uses of photographs in archaeological research remains largely neglected as a topic of research enquiry. Photographs which speak of here-and-now are often placed alongside those taken at the excavated sites to show the truths of the ethno-archaeological methods wherein inferences of the past are made through a
knowledge of the present. The juxtaposition of a photograph of a present-day day ‘home’ with that of a ‘post-hole’, viz., the circular patch, affirms the truisms of the analogical method which archaeology routinely uses for deriving knowledge of the unknown aspects of the past. The photograph of an archaeological find placed next to one which depicts a present-day shelter, or technologies of production ‘proves’ the validity of analogical inference. The displays of photographs allow the juxtaposition of different times, and they facilitate the making of archaeological evidence.

Emulating their peers in social anthropology, archaeologists have, for much of the twentieth century, looked at culture through the prism of functionalist and systemic perspectives. Culture in archaeology is seen through a universalist frame and comprises the interconnections of the different subsystems of religion, economics, politics, society and the environment, among others. Change in one subsystem effects changes within the others. Yet, in practice, the construct of an archaeological culture occurs through the classification and ordering of the specific traits of an excavated or explored assemblage. Or, in material terms, an archaeological culture comprises an assemblage of ‘similar’ things, either from the same time, the same society or deemed designed for similar uses. The continuation of the
normative view of culture is rather apparent when we read of cultures such as Painted Grey Ware, Acheulean and Han-Axe. The make-up of the archaeological culture as a discrete unit usually considered to span a specific geographical area also conforms, as preeminent historian of nationalism Anthony Smith has written, to ‘the nationalist picture of territorially rooted and culturally distinct nations’, evolving for a long time within distinct homelands.¹

The construct of archaeological culture, therefore, provokes an interrogation of the methods of creating categories. And since typologies of sameness and likeness contribute to histories of essentialisms, the construct implicates the latent aim of the discipline of archaeology to unearth and understand the characteristics, or the essential traits, of past societies.

The act of classification as the anthropological study of ‘persuasive resemblances’ by Michael Herzfeld ‘entails the conflation of what can be analytically regarded as separate domains of identities.’² Herzfeld has demonstrated the importance of regarding the labels of the illustrations of antiquities in books and exhibitions in order to gauge the manner in which they feed nationalist projects. After a cursory study of the frontispiece of a 1964 reprint of J. C. Lawson’s book on the survivalist study of the Greek folk religion, Herzfeld shows that the captions for the groups of similar objects ‘unknowingly shows one the many similarities between ancient and modern life in Greece.’³ Since the clustering of different objects into unique categories is regarded in archaeology as a natural method of ordering the world, it is salubrious to remember that the historiographies of imperialism, colonialism and nationalism have contributed rather substantively to the material creations of cultural essences. The ‘colonialist’ historiographies demonstrated cultural essentialisms by establishing ‘true histories’,
often through archaeological excavations, of the changeless traditions of the subject population, and the nationalist historiographies have amply shown the truths of the essence of a national culture for ‘proving’, no doubt erroneously, the long antiquity of nation-states.

The non-present past that is made real and visible by professional archaeologists provides proof of tradition and belonging. Its material make-up is often established by and sourced from the cultural politics of nation-making which, as we know, endows exclusive, unique and fiercely acquisitive identities. In noting the histories of cultural politics, we also note shifts in the understanding and fashioning of patrimony, the creations of social and collective memories, the claims of indigeneity and of the diaspora, and the conflicting interests of public good and capital gains. As astute commentators have observed, the valuation of culture resides in the ways in which the notions of cultural heritage function in relation to the various communities linked with it. The increasing academic thrust today towards undertaking public history and public archaeology compels us to regard the ways in which ideational phenomena, such as cultural ethos and civilizational legacies, are shown as materially real. Processes of heritage-making are usually partisan, and exclusive, and in this respect the growing field of museum studies which interrogates curatorial protocols creates analytical spaces for interrogating that which is left out. The museum ethnography of today is very concerned with developing methods, through deep collaborative work, of inclusion and democratic practices. Museums of the West now aim at being contact zones—public spaces where visitors are able to unravel the politics of representation and critique creations of elite and partisan histories. The curatorial imperatives unpick the taken-for-granted status of museums as authoritative destinations and remind students
that museums ought to surprise all, whatever their subject backgrounds, and help them see how institutions have the potential to be intercultural arenas of cultural production and consumption.

The shifting perceptions of what the public may properly see, where they may tread and with what new perspectives they may arrive at after their museum visit have also profoundly changed the protocols and practices of collections management. Curators now realize that they must constantly renew and rebuild old collections by bringing them into contact with other collections, and thereby provide the former with a different sociality. Which is why the re-installations of historical collections for public displays can never be neutral. With regard to issues of access, curators consider not only physical access to the collections in a particular museum but also the ways in which knowledge about those collections and about collecting practices is established and made available. They invest in issues of cultural property rights, they engage with contemporary source communities whose ancestral property and cultural heritage they manage and they aim at reflexive practices which demand interactions with museums as sites of fieldwork.

The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) at the University of Cambridge—whose collection of historical photographs I have curated for around 8 years (1997–2005)—together with the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University have made pioneering efforts in reaching out, in a sustained and academic manner, to source communities. The MAA hosted its first exhibition, commemorating the centenary of the first defined ‘anthropological fieldwork’, in 1998, and used the occasion to actively reach out to the Torres Strait Islanders. Anthropological expeditions were made to the Torres Strait Island in 1898–99,
by a team of scholars led by Alfred Cort Haddon. Lead curator Anita Herle established a dynamic connection between the Islanders and their ancestral objects by reaching out to the elders of the various communities and inviting them to the MAA so that they could talk about what they knew of the histories of the objects’ manufacture and use. Thus, the turtle-shell masks, feather headdresses, models, photos and even the exhibition texts became vital links between the past and the present. This new configuration of the historical collections serves as the contact zone between Cambridge and the Torres Strait today, and also represents one of the main sources of inspiration for the modern art of the Islanders. A lot has been written about the ‘outcome’ of the exhibition and the lead it has provided for anthropological research into the seminal collections of the Pacific made during the early twentieth century and now housed in various European museums.4

Here I wish to illustrate one aspect of the curation, namely, the efforts towards visual repatriation. Reprints of photographs shot during the 1898 expedition were taken back to Torres Strait during the late 1990s, and the stories which the islanders could recall about the people in the images, and of the events and places, were added to the museum’s photographic database. That information created new knowledge about the collecting practices of the expedition, and about many of the photographs.

The success of the project inspired a selection of MAA’s photographs being brought to India for the first time. A collection of early-twentieth-century photographs of the Bhil community of Gujarat, taken and collected by colonial administrator William Archer, sculptor Marguerite Milward and others were brought to the Adivasi Academy at Tejgadh, Gujarat, in 2005. The Academy comprises a museum managed by members of the Rathwa Bhil community who live
within the area. I saw a few photographs of them displayed in the Tejgadh Museum in September 2016. The plural meanings embedded in the photographs were, naturally, lost to me but I was informed that they had been ceremoniously carried to the museum by members of the Bhil community as objects of ancestral heritage. The reverence for the photographs as heritage objects encourages a critical regard of their viewing, which would allow us to glean aspects of their social lives and of the ways in which the historical photographs contribute to present-day self-fashioning of communities.

Museum transactions with its source communities often document the fragility of the latter’s rights to cultural property. In this respect, the creative uses of digital resources, including the sharing of museum databases, have allowed many communities to intervene in the acts of curating their cultural objects. Of the various projects of the MAA, Artefacts of Encounter was built upon the possibilities of long-distance cataloguing for the creation of a digital research environment. The project established two relational databases, of which Kiwa has allowed the input of data by dispersed research teams working from the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia and Brazil, with collections in institutions across Europe, America and Australia. The foundational component was to build a digital repository of some of the treasured ancestral artefacts of the Maori community (artefacts which were kept in different museums) and to support a Maori community website. The databases permit a live feed of descriptions, allow modifications of earlier entries and the restructuring of templates for different uses. Needless to add, they also hide and show information differently for the consumption of different groups of the public in relation to what the elders, or the communities’ spokesmen, consider appropriate. Such databases are carefully designed to retain all information,
maintain the integrity of the sources, and make visible the participatory aspects of digital networks in engendering new cultural codes of place, society, information and knowledge. The databases, therefore, hold saliency as cultural objects while coaxing us to concede that technology is functional precisely because of social interactions.

My emphasis on museum curation is driven by the truism that historians and archaeologists often neglect the manner in which data is created within museums and archives. Researchers often engage with the museum- and archive-catalogue cards as unimpeachable sources. However, institutional databases inform us about curatorial practices and encourage us to ask how sources are produced. Data curation also creates an acute awareness of the constructedness of cultural heritage. For in presenting members with artefacts of their cultural heritage, curatorial practices create realities about culture and heritage. Collections-based research, therefore, forces us to ask the question: Who speaks for culture? It helps us realize that source communities do not wait passively out there to be identified and included. The undertakings of ‘public history’ and ‘public archaeology’ demand critical enquiries into what is selected as source, and reflections regarding the strong curatorial directions which guide information from the source communities, and which show us that the writing of the past and the present often happen at the same time.

The postcolonial administration of Indian archaeology and museums is replete with examples of the conflicting interests of partisan, regional and national heritage-making schemes which convey the imperialism of postcolonial nationalism. For example, amendments to the (Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904) entailed a fresh classification of the listed monuments for protection by the Centre for the states. The Act also gave Parliament the mandate of selecting monuments of national importance
for the Union list. An early example of such conflicts which the act engendered was the Bombay Presidency’s claims to protect the rock-cut caves of Elephanta and Kanheri, which the Central government dismissed without due consideration. Another instance was the reluctance of the heads of the princely states to part with the antiquities they had loaned to the international exhibition of Indian art at London. On return of the exhibits to New Delhi in August 1948, the ruler of Bahawalpur, for example, was willing to give away the sculptures and the wooden works of art but not the paintings which the director general of the Archaeological Survey of India wanted and believed would enrich the collection of the National Museum. The ruler of Jaipur wrote to the Joint Secretary, Ministry of States, V. Shankar in 1951 that:

I regret it is not possible for me to transfer permanently to the museum exhibits from Jaipur sent for the Indian exhibition in London, as I have already created a national trust for the Jaipur art treasures. I feel very strongly that Jaipur, which has always been well known for its work of art and attracts a large number of scholars and tourists, should retain its valuable art relics to encourage local arts altogether, and not split them up.5

Ten years later, in 1959, Sawai Man Singh II established the Maharaja of Jaipur Museum, now known as the Sawai Man Singh II Museum. What is interesting to note is the manner in which the Indian government trivialized the princely states’ ‘parsimonious attitude’ towards contributions for a ‘national art’—an attitude well represented by the quip of a secretary of the Education Ministry who said, ‘They have not yet got rid of their attitude of suspicion. If we have a little patience, we shall be able to get them all.’6

The histories of museum-making in the colonial and postcolonial eras allow us to interrogate the competing
claims of regional and national patrimonies. The Varendra Research Society in Rajshahi (now Bangladesh) allows us to map some of the intellectual histories of region- and nation-making at the cusp of British India’s moment of decolonization. The society was established with a museum, in 1910, at the behest of two Bengali antiquaries, Akshay Kumar Maitra and Ramaprasad Chanda, who solicited the support of the local zamindar of Dighapatia, Sarat Kumar Ray, for ‘promoting the study of archaeology, anthropology, history, literature and art in relation to India, with specific reference to Bengal.’ The members conceived of undertaking archaeological explorations and excavations in order to seek ‘the ethnic origin of the Bengali race’, of which the most spectacular were the excavations at Paharpur, funded by the society and undertaken by Calcutta University in 1922.

The excavations at Paharpur brought to light the rich history of the Pala period, and thereby, Bengal’s ‘Golden Age’, and, according to the Society, ‘allow[ed] Bengalis to acquire knowledge of their ancient culture’ and were ‘of great importance to the nation as a whole’. At once we note the conflations of region-making and nation-making. Unlike the Varendra Research Museum, which exhibited the significance of the ‘Bengali nation’ for the ancient ‘Indian nation’, the new Bihar Museum in Patna, opened to the public on 2 October 2017, aims at awakening the splendours of ancient Magadha by bringing to public consciousness the ancient civilization of modern Bihar as the glorious civilization of Ancient India. The Museum, however, is deemed ‘international’ in scope, and been built at great cost—more than Rs 40 crores—by a Japanese architectural firm, and expertise in collections management provided by consultants based in Canada. It has absorbed the archaeological collections of the Patna Museum that was established in 1917 with the intention of displaying the
splendours of the new province of Bihar and Orissa after the vast area was separated from the Bengal province in 1912.

The similarities in the history-building endeavours of the colonial and present-day Bihar government are quite obvious. The new Bihar Museum has stripped the Patna Museum of all its prized antiquities, leaving it only with its zoological and eighteenth-century collections. The narrative of the Bihar Museum is simple: showcasing the deep antiquity of Bihar, from its prehistoric roots. The new displays, among which the Yakshi of Didarganj is presented as the mascot of the glorious civilization of ancient Bihar, brings no new histories, although the brief of the expert committee had been ‘to fill in the historical gaps within the topography of modern Bihar so that there are no dark ages’. The contradictions—I hope—are apparent to you all. The Bihar Museum represents the trend of the new Indian states to showcase the glorious ancient pasts of their brand-new territories—we may expect a more magnificent example from the Amaravati Archaeological Museum which is being commissioned by Andhra Pradesh to outshine the cultural institutions of Telangana from which the latter has been bifurcated.

The new galleries of the Bihar Museum have been planned with an anthropological segment showcasing the rich tribal history of Bihar that supposedly compares to the rich tribal history of the new state of Jharkhand created out of the former state of Bihar. Needless to add, the ‘tribals’ have not been consulted on the ethnographic displays of their cultural histories. The exclusion draws our attention to what a public museum in India that feigns inclusion and participatory processes continues to look like. One may add here that, despite the growing cries within India for the repatriation of specific objects and artifacts from many
‘western’ museums, including the UK for the Kohinoor, museums in India continue to invest very little in ensuring the rights of cultural property of the tribal groups or the *janajatis* who are now being Hinduized through spurious origin stories. Historicizing origins of things that cannot be seen reflects political acts, not scholarship.

The acts of heritage-making by Indians during the early twentieth century allow us to regard the imperialism of national politics. An example is the exhibition of the Inter-Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi five months before Indian Independence, the brainchild of Nehru who thought it would bring into public consciousness the lost unity of the Asian continent. Curated by the Museums Branch of the old Archaeological Survey of India, it was aimed at ‘illustrating one central theme: India’s cultural intercourse with other countries of Asia in the ancient world.’

The exhibition remains the venue for the first public display of the artefacts of the Indus civilization in India. [I don’t have the time here, but I would also like to interrogate this whole notion of civilization which archaeologists create through trait-listing archaeological assemblages.] As you know, the Bronze Age archaeological civilization, retrieved through excavations during the 1920s, was of immense national value for the colonized Indians. As opening objects of the inter-Asian exhibition, the Indus objects—and I quote the curator V. S. Agrawala here, ‘put India on the archaeological map of the most ancient world, mark[ed] out this country as the builder of international contacts even in the remote proto-historic period of about 3000 BC’.[10] We need to remember that this was made more than 50 years ago, decades before the study of global economies and connected histories had begun to fashion precolonial South Asia’s historical scholarship. A careful study of the references
of the Exhibition in the journals of the Museums’ Association provides reasons to suspect that the Indus objects were shown also to demonstrate the possibilities of extending the history of greater India into the third millennium BCE. In retrospect, the aim of the display, to highlight ancient India’s achievements as a cultural colonizer on the eve of modern India’s decolonization, appears profoundly ironic. The politics of decolonization in South Asia, as we all know, is imbued with the Partition of 1947, the largest displacement of people in recorded human history and an event that entrenched the cause of religious nationalism. Archaeologically, as *The Hindu* had declared in 1949, the Partition appears to have been negotiated by a ‘fairy exchanging children hawkishly […] a challenging experiment in the domination of geography by man […] In consequence we have lost Mohenjo Daro, Harappa, Barbaricon, the river that gave us a name, the cradle of the Rigveda, the homes of Panini and Kautilya, the seat of the famous university, the centre of great schools of art, and the kingdom of Brahman Shahis who, for long, were watchdogs of the north-western frontier of India.’

Partition affected British India’s institutional assets; the steering body of the Partition Council also managed the divisions of the archives and collections, expensive camp and office furniture, and field and laboratory equipment of the central institutions of the colonial government. The Harappa Gallery of the National Museum in New Delhi presents a view of the Hindu culture of the Indus civilization through India’s core collections of artefacts from Mohenjo Daro and Harappa. These more than 15,000 objects, officially declared as India’s [Partitioned] share in 1948, have been prominently displayed by the National Museum since its inception in 1949. However, we would be right in conjecturing that the visitors who have
thronged the galleries have remained ignorant of the fact that they are in the presence of a ‘partitioned’ collection.

Of the lesser valued divided goods is the pottery vase discovered during excavations at Mound F or, the ‘Great Granary Mound’ at Harappa. The find was recorded in the excavation report as ‘two rough carinated pottery vases marked with a cross on the concave upper portion’. India has only one vase (accession no. 2919);12 we can expect the other—with a different accession number—in the collection of the National Museum in Karachi. However, the display of Indus and Taxila jewellery in the first four cases in the National Museum’s Ornament Gallery [Alankaar], ought to encourage curious visitors to pause and look again—they are confronted with many halved objects which evoke the idea that each is displayed without its pair. So a closer look at a girdle of carnelian reveals only one end spacer; and the ‘jadeite necklace’ in the same case, placed at the top, comprises partitioned halves of two bigger pieces re-fashioned for India in July 1949. Unlike the carnelian girdle, the jadeite necklace was physically spliced—it was found with seven pendants suspended on a thick gold wire. In order to divide the necklace, the gold wire was removed and the beads separated. India received an extra ‘pendant’ because Pakistan was allowed to retain a larger share of the gold jewellery from Taxila.13

In fact, the Minute of 29 July 1947 of the Archaeological Survey of India, Museums Branch, records: ‘Out of 145 objects of gold and silver jewellery in the Taxila Museum, only 47 have been brought to India and in terms of gold in tolas, about twice as much gold has been left behind in the Taxila Museum.’ The decision to partition these ornaments was approved by Mortimer Wheeler before he left India in 1948, and his note to N. P. Chakravarti, then Director General, ASI, reflects the matter-of-fact manner in which
the division was undertaken. Curiously, the Indian govern-
ment has chosen to remain non-reflective of the displays of
the ornament since 1949. The labels of the objects have
never informed museum visitors that they are being shown
‘half’ pieces. Yet, when in the 1990s the government was
asked by an American university which was curating an
exhibition on the Indus civilization and a scholarship, to
loan the necklace and the girdle, it refused. That silence rep-
resents the conscious act of forgetting and erasures which
nationalism nurtures.

The Harappa Gallery was refurbished specifically for
the convention of the World Archaeology Congress in
1994—the only time it was held in India—to dazzle the
international delegates. Yet another instance of the politics
of curating national culture and the fundamentalism which
embeds a nation-saving archaeology. The large introductory
text panel of over a thousand words at the entrance informs
visitors of Rudra worship, the existence of the Namaskara
mudra, Yoga mudra, yoni pitta, rangashala in the Indus civi-
lization and the achievements of the Indian archaeologists.
In addition, visitors are shown truth-making photographs
of objects in situ to impress upon them the veracity of the
questionable finds, and more text panels inform them of
various Hindu beliefs—for example, those related to
death—which the third millennium BCE objects ostensibly
embody. It is also significant that the Gallery, despite being
under the care of the prehistory section of the museum, is
bereft of a proper narrative of the prehistory of the Indian
subcontinent. The neglect towards curating the ‘primitive
objects of primitive people’ adds to the conscious curation
of modern Hinduism which traces its ancestral lineage
through an urbane, achieving, sophisticated but hoary past.
Moreover, the Harappa Gallery creates a hermetically sealed
understanding of what constitutes and represents the
‘Harappan’. The exhibits are grouped into types—terracotta figures, ornaments, vessels, seals, gamesmen, toys, weights, objects of shell, bone, ivory and pottery. These classifications follow the precedents of the display of archaeological objects in the inter-Asian exhibition of Delhi in 1947.

The display and circulation of antiquities have, therefore, always served political and ideological ends. Yet, in our encounters with them, we are often led to reflect on how little we actually know of the past. For example, the striking statue of Kanishka exuding physical strength prompts us to ask: What did the local people make of it? What notions, if at all, of foreignness coloured their perceptions of the image of their king? Were they at all allowed to see the statue?

The visual and material qualities of objects impinge upon storytelling in ways which those who guide how they are to be viewed cannot control. The histories of their creation and consumption provide evidence of connected histories, and of their currency in the intellectual networks of knowledge-production. In reckoning with the agency of objects, we are made to look for the changing epistemologies of evidence, culture and heritage throughout histories and between societies, and in this the practices of curation show us the fallacy of imposing fixed meanings of culture, and caution us against the searches for civilizational legacies which archaeology and heritage-making schemes continue to demonstrate ‘as facts on the ground’ through the logic of analogy.

3 Herzfeld, Cultural Intimacy, p. 100.


6 Report of the Secretary, Ministry of States, 27/12/49, File No 4(13)-L/49, NAI (National Archives of India).


10 Agrawala, ‘Inter-Asian Exhibition of Art and Archaeology’, p. 29.


12 M. S. Vats, *Excavations at Harappa: Being an Account of Archaeological Excavations at Harappa carried out between the Years 1920-1921 and 1933-34* (Calcutta, 1940), p. 33. The object is in Case 19 in the Harappa Gallery. The artefacts in the Gallery were research-catalogued by me during my tenure as Tagore Scholar in the National Museum (2015–16).

Audience Member 1. I am curious to know your thoughts on the attempts being made to develop multiple narratives and new ways of curating museums, such as in the new Partition Museum.

Guha. I have seen the Partition Museum. In fact, I talked about the Bihar Museum because I tried to write some of the text panels and labels for them. New ways of curating museums in India—no one is really considering the whole process of data curation. No one is thinking about what the data-entry fields should entail. There is something called Jatan, a database being made on a national level, followed by the National Museum in New Delhi, the Indian Museum in Calcutta, the CSMVS Bombay—not the Partition Museum because that is a private museum—and most of the national museums. But there too it is assumed that if one can write a label for an object and then display it amid beautifully painted walls, amid galleries of steel and glass, then that is all that is required to curate in a ‘new’ way. But is that correct? Are you really providing anyone with new information? The Partition Museum is, of course, a museum with no objects—only pictures, snippets. I have seen the history of partition curated at the Manchester Museum by Reena Kallat. Where were objects in that? There were objects she had gathered, but that was, of course, the Partition of the Indians as people remembered it in Britain.

A lot has been written on the Partition Museum here. Those of you who come from artistry or social anthropology will know of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s work. I do not see any of that being translated...
into the Partition Museum. It has to evoke a memory—but how it it creating a Partition memory today? We have suppressed our Partition memories for so long and so extensively . . . The histories of memory-building of the Partition from 1947 till today—that is what the museum had a chance to do if it had taken a good look at the Holocaust museums around the world. That has not happened.

Audience Member 2. I’ve read about Rahul Sankrityana’s collection at the Patna Museum, and the family contesting it because it is not completely a government museum.

Guha. It is completely a government museum. The whole idea was to strip the Patna Museum of all its collection. Except the zoological collections, and those from the eighteenth century because they are not considered valuable as artefacts—they are new. So the eighteenth-century ‘ugly’ things made in Bihar have been left back at the Patna Museum. But what is ironic is that the Patna Museum was built exactly for the same purpose that the Bihar Museum was built for, when Bihar (and Orissa) became a state in 1912. That is when it was decided that a regional museum was needed to showcase the glories of that ancient state. And this is what nationalism is about. You are talking about a hoary past of a nation which is new. India was formed in 1947, but we want a prehistory of India. That is what these museum buildings show us—that nationalism is all about stretching back something to a time when it did not exist.

Audience Member 3. I work on metadata and how metadata is political and how we should be co-creating metadata with the source communities are working with. But my question is to do with traditions of
collections. The aboriginal communities in Australia, for example, have a content-management system called Mukurtu which allows them to observe cultural protocols around their own objects. So what I am asking is whether there is a tension between the museum—as a colonial legacy of collection and Enlightenment thinking about taxonomy—and these source communities working with these museums rather than creating their own archives and digital spaces.

Guha. There is a huge amount of tension and conflict that curators are now trying to address. Not address in terms of trying to smooth it out, but to make that tension transparent. Because why would a source community give its information willingly? It would also like to have a museum, it would also like to have its own archives, it would also like to curate things in a different manner—why would it want to hand it all over to a government? With the Torres Strait Islanders who were not given legal rights to the land, this conflict has been brewing for the past 30 years. So yes, there is tension, but the only thing a curator can do in terms of that is to think of the metadata. In archaeology, we used to talk about middle-range theory—these are bridging moments/elements in our heads when we jump from one conclusion to the other. So, when I write a caption or a label or I do what I simply call data entry, I have these notions of metadata in my mind. And I think what is coming up increasingly in the labels and text panels of museums—especially the ethnography museums—is to make that tension transparent in the label. The way we derive our inferences—let’s just make that transparent.

Chintan Girish Modi. I work on the Education for Peace initiative with Prajnya which is in Chennai. When I
went to the United States recently, I found that museums play a very significant role in education for peace, human rights and social justice. What would it be like if we thought of doing something similar in India? Have there been attempts to make, sat, a Dalit history museum or a museum which tells the history of the women’s movement? Because these are histories that are completely absent in textbooks. What would it be like if there were public education initiatives like this?

**Guha.** I have worked very little in Indian museums. I received a fellowship at the National Museum in 2015 as a Tagore Scholar, and my research was to catalogue and refurbish the Harappa Gallery—sadly that did not happen. I had to leave because they wouldn’t open the cases for me. I have worked a little at the Bihar Museum, just trying to guide them a bit and telling them things like ‘Please don’t have text panels depicting “the glory of ancient Bihar” because it doesn’t make any sense!’

I don’t work in museums any longer—I teach history at a university. Sometimes I take my undergraduate students to museums. After about half an hour, I have a bunch of bored young people around me. And no matter how much I try to make the visit engaging, they just say, ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah, it’s OK . . . can we get out and do something else?’

Such things don’t happen abroad, where they worry far more about outreach and interaction with the public. In Cambridge, for example, they have something called ‘the week of ideas’, during which schoolchildren are taken to museums in the dark. They take a torch with them and see the collections by the light of the torch only. They are allowed to stay there and are supposed to come up with completely unique,
individual ideas at daybreak when they are let out. These are probably ways of gathering some ideas about what children would like to see in a museum or what they derive from a visit to the museum.

Here, at the National Museum in Delhi, the Piprahwa case gives you something to think about. The relics were found through excavations during the late nineteenth century. Archaeologists would say much of the context has been lost. There is a book written about it by Charles Allen, *Plain Tales from the Raj: Images of British India in the 20th Century*, where he has mentioned the scandals. But what do we see in the gallery?—we see scores of Buddhist visitors who treat the gallery as a site of pilgrimage. They see nothing else of the National Museum.

There has been a lot written, for example by Kavita Singh, about whether museums should be allowed to be a site of religion and worship. Do you see the contradiction? Curators are saying: we would like visitors to engage with these objects. But the minute they try to engage in ways that are considered erroneous, the engagements are questioned. At the British Museum once, they had a Durga *pratima*, from Calcutta. It was during the Voices of Bengal exhibition in 2006, curated by Richard Blurton. And there was a lot of criticism mostly in the manner of: ‘How could you do this in a museum? Why are you placing a goddess for worship in a museum space?’ But perhaps what is important to consider is the dialogue that happens when such ‘aberrations’ are curatorially facilitated—in this case, the presence of the Durga provided a space to address the issue of museums as religious spaces.

**Audience Member 4.** I have a couple of short questions. How educated are the curators at Indian museums?
Who decides on the storytelling? And the part about educated curators strikes me because, as a child, I used to visit the Indian Museum in Calcutta. There used to be a skeleton of a mammoth. Last year, I went after several decades and discovered that the tusks of the elephant had been painted white with acrylic paint!

**Guha.** Well, the education of the curators . . . I will simply tell you what curators are supposed to have—they are supposed to have a degree, the same one I have, an MA in Ancient Indian History Culture and Archaeology (AIHCA). I have it from Deccan College in Pune. These kind of prescriptions, of what you need to have to be a museum curator or to be a superintendent of archaeology, were drawn up in 1960 when the Diploma of Archaeology came into being. They have continued since. Curators in university museums abroad would be from different departments. So, for the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (such as MAA, Cambridge), you would have different curators trained in archaeology or anthropology. Yet there are problems of having subject curators as well, because, irrespective of the discipline to which the collection is allotted, curators ought to be intellectually willing to engage with the all of the collections. They ought to regard the changing histories of collections and exhibitions. They ought to frequently think about what their exhibitions have led to in terms of history-making. This never gets talked about. And we also know that most museum objects languish unseen as part of reserve collections. We all know what happened with the Indian Museum when it was painted and renovated. But, instead of lamenting about it, it would help if something was done. And there you see the tension of engaging the public in the curatorial role—nothing seems to happen.
Can we not talk about it? Can we not have conferences where we can discuss these issues?

**Anjum Katyal.** We were just wondering about some of the schoolteachers here in the audience: if you have experiences of engaging with museums through your classes, with your children or even as individuals. Can we have at least one or two teachers asking something about trying to use the museum as part of teaching? As part of the classroom work or extra-classroom work?

**Meenakshi Khanna.** I teach at the Indraprastha College of Women at Delhi University. As a part of my endeavours to make students interested in history, I often organize field trips for them. In recent years, at least over the last two years, we have been visiting the National Archives so that the students have a sense of what a manuscript looks like—they can see it from close quarters, and somebody in the Oriental Section can explain to them the different ways in which these archives are formatted. For example, the subtle differences between a *farman* and a *nishan* and so on. Often the students are bored with these displays—as you mentioned too. On one particular occasion, there was an exhibition of paintings and images from the Deccan—it was called the Noras. Though it was a very attractive display, I had a problem with the narrative. And that is where I think—and this is closely related to the point you were making about the qualifications of a curator—we need a very strong intervention from somebody who knows the basic narrative or the context in which this curation has to be done and displayed. I understand that there are other problems. If the narrative is of a particular kind, for example, like the grand narrative of a national history, that creates one kind of a problem. But, for schoolchildren especially or university students, you
need one basic narrative so that they have a sense of chronology of things that are on display.

**Guha.** True. But the point is that when you have a narrative, when you have any narrative, you are actually giving the authority to the curators. So sometimes, what these smaller museums do—and this is something that probably the Partition Museum should have done—is to have a space where visitors can create their own narratives of the exhibits/collections. This is why I mentioned Kiwa, where whoever wants to engage, can. Everybody does not want to look at objects and is not interested. But if you are, and if you want to say something or you have some information, there ought to be a way which is equally formal way of recording that information which then feeds back into the museums’ database. The ‘public’ then feels more included within the museums’ narratives or storytelling. What we have in most museums is a little book in which you say whether you liked the exhibits. Or you have outreach teachers with sheets for jotting ideas, but the completed sheets then get thrown away. Nobody incorporates the information that the museum gets—and the amount of information it gets every day is amazing!

With the National Archives—I have never done Sanskrit, so I can’t say, but I do have family members who do this. But Sanskritists today, for example, are not simply saying that this word means this or that—they are looking at genealogies of manuscripts, and trying to find the stemma (sometimes they are unable to find it, which also provides information), looking at how a manuscript has been used, when it was written—not only why it was written but also the person who then read it and what he made of it. And these things, the traces of what we may glibly call life histories or social biographies of objects—that is what they are trying to record.
Now, how are we going to show that to students or children whom we take into the National Museum so that they know what a manuscript looks like? In my mind, because I have done it in Cambridge with the photo archives, one way to make it participatory is with the use of digital technology which enamours everybody—everyone thinks they are doing brilliant work by inputting something into a computer rather than writing it with a pen. So be it. What is important is that we include that information and make it transparent, make it public—and databases allow you to do that. You can make databases with 20 pages worth of data, but then what comes up in the public is a very brief entry. This can be done very easily through technology—it all depends on how we interact with it. But often the imagination or the will is lacking—the attitude is ‘it is not needed’ or ‘they are just schoolchildren, why should we record their data? They are not important enough’—that happens, and we talk about democracy! So, all this feeds into culture as well because the whole notion of culture is: ‘This is your culture’ vs ‘This is archaeological culture’. It all comes down to boundaries.

Roshni Ravi. I teach alternative history in a small school in Bangalore and, every year, I take my sixth-standard students to the Government Museum in Bangalore. The collection is not very large but I find that the students are very excited when they visit the museum and we usually spend about an hour there. There is a small section with a few artefacts from Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, and we time our visit to after we have studied the Indus Valley civilization. Their eyes light up at the sight of these artefacts. But I find the collection to be rather disjointed—and I do not know whose story the museum is trying to tell. What I want to ask you is:
what are some of the ways in which students can engage with museums, with their curators? Do you think there are people we can write to, to see if they will take ideas from children?

Guha. If I try to answer these questions, then we will remain here indefinitely because each museum will have its own set of problems. But when you say the stories are disjointed, I will say ‘Great!’—because every story is not connected. Certain things can be disjointed. Let people use their imagination and think about how they would join them up.

Audience Member 5. I wanted to ask whether responding to visitors’ views or people’s opinions is always positive or productive for improving a museum. I ask this because I have seen a major change at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum over two visits spanning approximately 15 years. The first was in the late 1980s when the museum galleries displayed, at the very entrance, horrific images of the aftermath of an atomic explosion. And as you moved on into the museum, you found more information about the war, Japan’s participation in it and so on. On my second visit, about 15 years later, I was shocked to see that the entrance gallery had been entirely sanitized and all the objects which would have represented the horror of a nuclear explosion had been taken away. When I asked where they were, I was told that they had been removed to a special gallery on the top floor for visitors who were specifically interested in them. The main galleries were about information on the war, the ports, why Hiroshima was chosen and so on, entirely displayed with the help of digital technology—there were no objects.

I was curious about this change, but also angry and disappointed. So I went to the chief curator and asked why this was so. His response was brief and categorical:
'Visitors did not appreciate the horrific images displayed at the museum. Visitors not only from the US but also from within Japan. Japan would now like to move on rather than stay stuck with those horrible memories. They are available for those who are especially interested—so you are welcome to visit the top floor.'

I felt that was a sad thing to happen because if that museum had made an impact on me as a visitor, it was mainly because it brought alive for me the horror of the atom bomb. Now it is simply a museum which gives you a lot of information. It certainly responds to Japan’s new nationalism which would like Japan to be a nation like any other that has moved on.

**Guha.** You have answered your own question! These exhibits, what they exhibit, how they exhibit, what kind of stories they say are fashioned sometimes by politics, sometimes the way a society wants to remember something—which can be outside politics, although I don’t think it ever is . . . These bring about changes. There is no answer to any of this. These are instances, these are what museum practices do, these are things for us to think about. And the reason I draw museums into my work is because history-writing very rarely engages with it. Archaeologists, who should know better because they work with artefacts, also do not engage with it, and I find that problematic in terms of the method.

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**Sudeshna Guha** teaches History at Shiv Nadar University. She was trained in field archaeology at Deccan College, Pune and has worked for over a decade in museums, in the UK and also in India.
I am truly an outsider. I am not a historian—I don’t quite know what I am! I am supposed to be teaching philosophy. So, if you ask me what I am doing in a workshop meant for schoolteachers and those who deal with history books, my only response is that I have some interest in education. But for this particular talk, I have three reasons to give in order to explain why this issue is of deep interest to me.

One, my first engagement with related questions on history arose as a response to Professor Romila Thapar’s provocative piece on questioning and critical enquiry. I have been particularly interested in the question of critical thinking and the need for some notion of criticality in public history. What does the notion of critical enquiry in the subject matter of history—not necessarily history seen only as a discipline—actually mean? This question is much closer to my discipline of philosophy because it is about the nature of enquiry, the nature of knowledge and how different disciplines have different knowledge systems. So, that is an immediate connect to what I have been working on so far.

Two, there is the larger question of cultural histories—I am using it in a very loose sense here, not in the sense a
historian would. Part of my work has been engaging with Indian philosophical texts and I have been working with a group for long now, the Sri Vaishnavas, related to Ramanuja’s ideas. My interest in them is not merely philosophical but also sociological, primarily to understand the social philosophy of Ramanuja as he was instrumental in challenging beliefs about caste order. In this particular tradition, there is an interesting problem related to history. According to it, there is a lineage of saints—the Alvars—who are regarded as the originators of the Sri Vaishnava tradition. We have similar narratives for the Shaivites. But, if you ask about the time periods of the Alvars, it often leads to disagreement and debate, because the time period by which the Alvars are located for them is drastically different from what historians would believe. The historians’ dating is nowhere close to the cultural dating of the Alvars. This is not special to the Alvars—it is just as true for the Ramayana, it is true for the Mahabharata, for many other ‘historical processes’. But how does one engage with these discrepancies? This cannot be reduced to a mere methodological, materially evidential or even a disciplinary question. And what is this cultural construction of time for people who want to talk about it in this sense of ‘cultural history’?

Three: the larger, broader question about school textbooks. What should the content of a history textbook be? You are specialists in this, but my curiosity about it stems from an earlier debate I had with some educationists on science education. The point I was trying to discuss was: What should a science textbook contain? Should a science textbook only have the content of science, what the scientists have discovered? Or should it, as an essential part of the textbook, have the ‘nature or science’ debate in it? This is a topic which, as I am sure many of you are aware, has been discussed quite a lot in education. Should teaching
science not only be about the content of science but about the nature of science? To me, that question seemed to be very relevant when I was trying to grapple with these questions on history. Does the teaching of history involve as much the nature of history along with the way history is presented in terms of whatever it is? I am not saying it isn’t. What does it mean to say that the nature of history is the only way by which people can understand what is being taught as history? And what would we mean by ‘nature of history’? Perhaps we would have some divergences there. I would like to suggest an approach to this particular question. The reason I do this in the context of debates in science is mainly because a lot of students in science learn science as a set of assertions about certain things about the world. And assertions, beyond a point, soon become ideological. It is good for schoolchildren to learn assertions as facts about which they can write exams, but the line between a set of assertions and ideologies is very thin. The point is to understand why and in what context those assertions are meaningful.

I really want to take Professor Thapar’s point about critical enquiry deeply into the self-critical enquiry of a discipline by itself, so that it recognizes that whatever assertion it makes is grounded on a particular kind of self-enquiry. In that sense, just using the term ‘evidence’ does not help me at all, because in these cultural historical narratives evidence is often used as a term and refers to a very different notion of evidence. The challenge is to be able to present our theory of evidence in a way which trumps their theory, or makes them understand that what they are offering cannot constitute true evidence. This is true in history as much as in the sciences. Often children talk about genetics. Genetics is a classic example of how ignorance can confidently underlie assertions. Children in the fifth and sixth
standards will give you lessons on genetics: They have no problem talking about the reality of genes, genes doing this and genes doing that. But what is it to reflect on the nature of a gene? And why is it necessary to believe that something like a gene is meaningful within the discourse of biology? This is part of the problem in scientific texts. Just invoking the notion of evidence does not do the job and, therefore, philosophy of science has spent a lot of time trying to figure out what the nature of evidence is. Can we bring these ideas into the debate on evidence in history?

The domains which both history and science talk about have an interesting aspect in common: the domain that a very large part of science talks about is the invisible world, a world that is not accessible to perception in the way the macroscopic world is. The domain that history speaks of is not just invisible—it is not even ‘present’ in the way the invisible world is present in science. The domain for history is the past, that which is already gone. The invisibility of the past is different from the invisibility of a world beyond our perceptions. It is the similarity of the domain of the unperceived that raises the need for something akin to scientific method in history. For both history and science, the task is to make sense of that which cannot be made visible in the ordinary sense of the world.

However, the domains are invisible in two different ways and you will see that it is related to an essential question about the very idea of time. This is where I want to begin. There are two very important functions of culture. One, to create a sense of what has gone by, a sense of connection to something, through legends or stories or narratives about individuals, communities, the world and the cosmos. Two—and this is an extremely important part of any idea of culture—every culture creates its own sense of time. This is very well known to sociologists because one
of the defining ways by which we understand societies is through the way that society creates its own sense of time, a social sense of time at each new epoch. These two features of culture are also important in the context of history, especially in the academic practice of history. This also leads to a conflict between culture and history in the way that each understands time, in the way each narrativizes what we might call ‘temporal sequences’. Although this conflict on the surface seems to be about the idea of time, it is really about the representation of time in two different domains. Here is where philosophy plays a mediating role between culture and history.

If there is a topic that philosophers love, it is Time. What I meant when I said that different cultures (including different disciplines) have different senses of time, I was referring to the model of time each uses in its specific domains. For example, in physics they will talk about nanoseconds. We do not know what nanosecond is except that it is a kind of a measure/count of a particular thing, but I presume historians have not moved to the domain where nanoseconds becomes important for them. Geology has a scale of time which is millions of years and, again, for history, that ‘millions of years’ does not make sense to the narratives of human history that historians talk about. The notion of indigenous is very closely related to the scale of time, more than time itself.

So, disciplines create their own construct of time in order to be able to do something with it. And if we accept that, then we recognize something very simple: notions of time—very loosely I will refer to them as cultural time and historical time—culturally have much in common. Especially their basic problem in conceptualizing time. This is a fundamental problem of human cognition. If you want to say something about time and the past, you have to be able
to conceptualize it in some sense. And, interestingly, time seems to be most dominantly conceptualized through spatiotemporal metaphors. We tend to talk about time more in the way we talk about space—our awareness and discourse about time is often through the imagery of space. This has deep implications in the definition not of time per se but of what we mean when we speak of ‘the past’. If you ask somebody to say something about ‘time’, they will in general draw on the images of space. The implication is that there is no single idea of past which is available to all cultures in the same manner, and different cultures can produce different ideas of the past, of ways of talking about the past.

The influential work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson on conceptual metaphors tells us a lot about the way in which spatial metaphors are used to talk about time. For example, two holidays can be described as being close together—here, although holidays are separated by time, they are referred to as if they are spatially close. We talk about deadlines as ‘rapidly approaching’, we look forward to ‘a brighter tomorrow’, troubles ‘lie behind us’ and so on. There is an interesting experiment which I will very briefly mention here, which indicates how complex this problem of talking about the past and the future really is. Typically, we talk as if the past is behind us and the future ahead. We even tend to gesturally point to the future and the past—by spatially pointing ahead of us (future) and pointing behind our back (past). However common these gestures may be, we should remember that they are representative of only one particular conceptualization of the future and the past. Some might even call it a very modernist conception of time. Rafael Núñez, a cognitive scientist, shares an example of talking to some people at the hillside in the Yupno valley, a remote nook high up in the mountains of Papua New Guinea. When he requested them to talk about
the past and the future, they used gestures to do so. When an interviewee uttered yesterday, his hands were backward; when he mentioned tomorrow, he leapt forward. Núñez and his team were recording him, and then they had to change the camera angle as the light faded. In doing so, they discovered that they were ‘looking at a steep slope towards a jagged bridge’. They asked the same question about yesterday and tomorrow. And Núñez reports that ‘now when he talked about yesterday, he gestured forward not backward and as he explained tomorrow, he gestured back over his shoulder, up towards the ridge’.

The importance of this observation is that the idea of past and future are not ‘universal’. What he points out is that the future for this person and the community represented something uphill. The future was something difficult, something they had to struggle through towards. The interesting point here is that community’s conception of time was not anchored in the body as Western modernist conceptions are, but in the contours of their world. You can completely change the way you understand these questions about the past, the future, the back and the front, not by the relationship to the body, not even by reference to the world around you, but by relationship to the larger social structures around you!

In my new book (with Gopal Guru), we discuss the notion of cultural time present in caste discourses in India. This is a completely different way of understanding how particular notions of social time are created through that concept. There are many such examples. I will give one of how these different formulations of past and future occur in different communities and languages. Languages which talk about the past and future have an important role in defining what the past and the future can be. So the belief that there is an access to the past and the future independent
of the linguistic structure that you have, should be understood more carefully. For example, typically in English we say that the past is behind and the future is in the front. What is the basis of this metaphor? Why is the future in the front and the past at the back? The basis of this practice according to cognitive scientists, is a walking metaphor—you walk to the front, you move towards something. Yet there is nothing ‘obvious’ about this. For the Aymara, a South American tribe, the past is in front and the future, behind. The future is behind because you do not know what lies in the future. I am sure everybody in this room will accept that whatever concept of the future you may have, it is not something you know entirely. We do not know exactly what is going to happen one minute from now. Therefore, the image of having the future in front does not make sense to the Aymaras. So even with these very simple conceptualizations of what constitutes past and future, you can get a completely different set of relationships between history and culture.

Another interesting example is how writing systems influence our idea of the past and the future. For example, in English, the past is often represented as leftward and the future as rightward because we write from left to right. In Urdu or in Hebrew, the past is rightward and future is leftward because they are written in the opposite direction to English. In Mandarin, past is above and future is below. So, even more ways of talking about the past. I will share an interesting example of how much these linguistic practices of writing influence our historical consciousness: Asked to arrange three temporarily ordered images—a banana with its peel intact, a half-peeled banana and a banana half-eaten—it was found that English-language speakers laid the three objects from left to right thus: first the unpeeled banana, then the half-peeled banana and then the half-eaten
banana. However, Hebrew-speakers laid them out from right to left—in exactly the opposite order! For English speakers, the order of the objects is the direction of time as moving forward to the future whereas it is the reverse for the Hebrew speakers. Can writing practices have such a great impact on how we imagine the past and future?

I think there is something profoundly interesting in all this. Even if we ignore language, time, past, future, etc.—these are presumably difficult concepts—how can we ignore the different arrangements of the three bananas by different language speakers? If the experiment is robust, then it seems that we arrange these objects based on structures of language and writing. In other words, the way in which we conceptualize these terms, especially time-ordering, is through these spatial images captured in writing.

There are important implications of such cognitive practices, one of which is the problem of causation. Causation is intrinsically related to time, and the first fundamental principle of cause-effect is a principle of time that is also spatialized, which means that the way in which we talk about the past and history also gets spatialized. Often, while talking to ordinary people and children who are learning history, we can see that they tend to visualize historical processes as places which you traverse. Years such as 1960, ’65, ’70, ’75, ’80 are spoken of as if they are different places we pass through. What really is the difference between coming from Bangalore to Kolkata and coming from 1916 to 2018—other than that the cities on the way are not called Bhubaneshwar, etc., but 1970, 1985, 2000, 2005 and so on? That picture, by which we commonly make sense of progress and movements and events, which seems to be about time is really not about that. In a sense, therefore, it goes back to the question of what, then, is this object of enquiry which these kinds of cultural histories are involved
in? What do we really want to talk about? I am going to tie this in with the question about enquiry and method to show how there is this very interesting connection between cultural narratives of ‘historical process’ and the notion of scientific or larger historical method within history as a discipline.

A discipline is characterized by its own modes of enquiry. Obviously, when we want to say that there is a historical method, we also refer to particular kinds or ways of questioning. So if I want to have a discussion with someone who claims that the Alvars were born 10,000 years ago, then what kind of methods of enquiry do I expect that person to follow so that we could have a meaningful debate? An important point about the modes of enquiry is the accompanying aims of enquiry. What is it that you are trying to do when you do something in a particular manner? Typically, in the modern academic tradition, the aim of enquiry has always been to move towards a state of certainty. And that is why this whole question about questions and debate really becomes a starting point for particular forms of enquiry. You begin with a question, you want to move to the other question, and so on. But if you want a movement towards knowledge, if you think the aim of enquiry is to come to a piece of knowledge about something, certainty about something, the obvious question is this: Knowledge about what? And here the question of history becomes very important because when you ask the question ‘Knowledge about what?’, the ‘what’ is not given to us naturally. The ‘what’ of every discipline is constructed as objects of discourse which a discipline creates in order to be able to ask the questions it wants to ask of them. So, if history has to have a meaningful notion of enquiry, it is not just that we have something given to us as the past, but that history has to create an object which you could call ‘the past’ or could
call a ‘historical event’, or even ‘time’—and then address our enquiries to them in order to know something about that object which is of interest to us. So, the object of interest is extremely important, and it is not just about history. I will give you a classic example and I think a very insightful one.

If you look at science—again, I am looking at science because of the overlap between these methods—then it has a very simple definition for the object of enquiry. If you ask, ‘What is the object of enquiry for Physics, Chemistry or Biology?’, I would say, ‘Nature’. Nature is the object of enquiry for science, a simple fact taught from school onwards. But what is important—and something historically so influential in the development of a discipline—is that there is nothing ‘natural’ about nature. For science to be possible, nature has to be created as a concept. So, science creates a concept called ‘nature’ before it actually does any meaningful science. There are very good accounts of how in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, physics creates a particular view of nature that allows science to be practiced. As a consequence, the idea of nature in Physics is different from the idea of nature in Chemistry, different from the idea of nature in Biology although all of them are studying the ‘same’ object called ‘nature’.

Each of these disciplines creates its object of discourse which influences the mode of enquiry towards that. And if that is the case with disciplines like these, you can then imagine the problems with disciplines that deal with time and the past! What kind of an object of enquiry does history need, and how does it create its object of discourse? If the object of discourse is the past—I am not even saying ‘the truth of the past’—I quote Professor Thapar here ‘about understanding the past’—it need not be specific notions about the truths of the past, it could be some interpretation of the past. Whatever it is, that object about which we want
to say something cannot be given to us independent of the disciplinary forces under which we operate, and only under the disciplinary matrices can we create that object which all of us can look at and identify as history. The object a discipline creates defines the method. And obviously, if we have a very different kind of an object of analysis, then the method we create is going to be very different as well. Thus, for history to be possible as a discipline, for historical method to be possible as a meaningful set of practices, we must assume that the historical object is something which is given to us as a stable, unified ‘object’ which allows various perspectives on it and is not temporal in itself.

I will give an example to make this clear. A historical object is open for evaluation and testing, it is open to disagreements between two people, but in order to have that argument, we have to do something to that historical object. The default mode, which is what happens with the idea of a scientific method, is to make the past in the mould of a visual object. We have to consider this possibility that the historical method spatializes the historical objects. Unless you have these kinds of stable objects in front of you, available for your modes of enquiry through which you can derive knowledge, it is not possible to construct what you would call a discipline in the ‘scientific’ sense.

One way of looking at it is to say that when we look at the past, we see the past like an ‘object’. One classic instance of this process comes from the analysis of sound. When does music, a piece of music, become an object of knowledge? What should you do to that transience—because music is the closest thing to the flow of time—that correlates to the idea of time? When we ask what it is to scientifically or historically or critically study music, we find that any form of putting it under that method is to spatialize it. We cannot talk about the time-like nature of music in
that sense. So, I would say that the cultural ideas of time and history’s idea of method and enquiry are structurally similar. And that raises very important questions of how to deal with these challenges, how to deal with these questions of enquiry.

I want to come back to the question of history in textbooks—and drawing upon what Professor Thapar has been saying about critical enquiry—and note that this uncritical acceptance of scientific method and its correlates within elements of its historical method in questions such as the constitution of subjectivity in history, is a problem for me. And I am speaking as a person who is interested in the philosophy of science and concerned about how to understand the real complexity of these questions of scientific method. In other words, there is far more complexity and richness in trying to open up the question of historical method without reducing it to certain notions of science or scientific method that are not sufficiently complex. We do not have what we could call the ‘epistemology of flows’ to understand how to understand processes, and thus we tend to reduce processes into things. This is a process that linguists have called nominalism—reducing ‘processes’ into ‘objects’, the project of nominalization.

So, how do we incorporate different notions of thinking about the past—these ideas of the past, present, forward, backward, future and so on—and how do we put that in conversation with particular notions of history’s idea of the past? Or is it that history’s idea of the past in history textbooks are dominantly ‘modernist’? Can we find other ways of making them engage with very different notions of past without worrying about the larger problem of what constitutes time, etc.? I think this has to be done as critical processes of enquiry leading us to have a critical self-reflection on the very idea of objects of historical discourse and the method that one would need to be able to talk about it.
Tina Servaia. I was very struck by how you kept talking about the method in history. When we look at science, it is very easy to see that there is a singular method, there is a scientific method. I’d like your view on whether there is a singular method in history or are there multiple methods of studying history?

Sarukkai. I am not using ‘method’ in the singular at all! We know that there are multiple methods. So when I was using the term ‘method’, I was not using it in the singular sense. Method, in the way that I am using it, is any set of processes which are related to these ways of engagement with the object you want to study. Because disciplines create their own objects—they are not given to them innocently and a priori. Methods also have to be created to deal with the nature of objects that the discipline creates, and that is ‘methods’ in the sense that there is not one particular form of engagement. So, what I mean by method is not singular at all. Any way by which one can reach the aim of enquiry—if we assume that the aim of enquiry is knowledge about that object—is the question that you are talking about.

Alisha Sett. I teach at the Gyaan Prabha Institute in Mumbai. While creating these philosophy books for children, how have you embedded these ideas you have talked about today? Since they are encountering a discipline like philosophy for the first time, how did you embed these ideas of criticality and thinking through objects of knowledge?

Sarukkai. We did a 3–4 days’ workshop for children first and were very surprised at the large number of children who wanted to come. The way I conceived of it is that I first looked at the idea of perception. There are a lot
of overlaps to what we are doing here. We ask very simple questions to the child on what it is that they think they perceive. It begins with that and shows many different types of exercises. One of the things that really captures a lot of children’s attention is showing how animals perceive, for example—and we do a series of videos around it and then we make them ask themselves, to try to make them understand how to co-relate what they think they see and the objects which they see and so on. So, there is a series of things which is based on perception, then thinking, then ethics and judgement and so on. The books should hopefully be out soon.

Anand Taneja. I teach at the Vanderbilt University. I am not a historian but I am very interested in the questions of time and from within history. There have been challenges to the idea of linear teleology: for example, Reinhart Koselleck talks about the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous. He’s trying to think of conceptual history—how there are concepts and possibilities for life that do not disappear, that do not vanish into the past, but continue as possibilities for the present. So, that is one way in which he complicates ideas of linear time. Trying to imagine it in my own work: people are inhabiting and living in a fourteenth-century ruin or passing through it, how that creates a sense of time. What I am interested in—since you have been doing this work with children in a way, opening up philosophies that they can engage with—is: How would you think that we can get a sense of non-linear time or time that doesn’t just go from past to future but has this simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, to use Koselleck’s term? How do we get that into the classroom or at least into things that children engage with?
Sarukkai. I wish I knew the answer to that—I would get the next Nobel Prize! When I had a debate with the so-called ‘traditional orthodoxies’, who are working with very old traditions, what seemed very obvious to me was that time was not really a factor for history, for the historical consciousness. If I really pushed them and said that the Alvars could not be from 5,000 years ago, they didn’t have a stake in fixing you to that time, because, the aim of cultural history—I am using the word history wrongly here, but what I mean is temporality of any kind—of the cultural stories of the historical process is more about having a lived experience of it. To me, when I watch them do what they do to the texts of the Alvars, it is part of their daily practice and rituals. The historical question only arises in other kinds of contexts. In that sense, I feel that eventually the question of time is the UID—it is a unique identification marker and that is it. Practically speaking, you don’t need it for anything more. You [Anand Taneja] were saying this very interesting thing about Firoz Shah Kotla this morning—you could say all of it, and I could listen to it, not as a professional historian. And if you didn’t say that it was 1452 or the 1500s, or if I got the date wrong, what is it that I would lose in my understanding, or whatever that I think history should do to me? That is the question. The time marker is just a meaningless UID number which, by itself, doesn’t have any meaning at all, but it is a way of distinguishing certain kinds of things. If that is the case, then it actually liberates a lot of history from the unnecessary metaphysics of time. That is one escape out of it.

But the larger question you asked, and why I am saying that it is a difficult question is this, that the examples of these tribes from Papua New Guinea and South
America are actually pointers to the fact that we experience time. We are not able to conceptualize time other than as spatial, but there is a very deep phenomenological experience of time which is what differentiates our internal experience of time from our external experience of time through a clock. Now, with children, like many people who experience time when they deal with ancient texts, there is a particular kind of experience which can be grouped either as internal phenomenological or socially phenomenological. There is a very cultural experience of time where a group of people sit and chant these ancient texts. Therefore, they orient themselves to the world and other people based on their experience of time. And that is why the question of future, the way one looks at the future. In fact, if I remember correctly, it was Ricouer who, when talking about time, makes this very interesting point that if we looked at the future as something you look forward to and not regret that the past has gone by, it completely changes the way we understand the day-to-day experiences of our lives. I think there is sufficient possibility of bringing those kinds of thinking into making sense of history as an experiential domain—not just as a series of domains about certain kinds of historical facts presented in some sense. The big conflict which comes with all this is whenever history becomes a lived experience of some kind. That is where the real debate lies. When I give them a so-called fact for which they have no lived experiential quotient, it does not matter. They can either accept it or reject it, it just does not matter. So, can we take that into accounts of history? Does that change anything when we talk about historical events? Or should we say that, in a ‘true scientific method’, you
keep out all kinds of notions of experience of a
discipline, or experience of knowledge from the
knowledge which is presented by the discipline? There
is a deep connection there, I think.

Sachin Tiwari. My question is about a very practical
problem. I am going back to your comment that, in
schools, children learn science and they take it as asser-
tions and assertions become ideology. I want to ask if
you meant that there should be an alternative to this—
if this is not desirable? If that is the case, and in that case
I would tend to agree, what is the alternative? Because
what is happening in the school is that if I try not to
use the word ‘evidence’ we have a free class. There is
nothing else.

Sarukkai. No, I am not even talking about alternate sci-
ence. All I am doing is asking: What does it mean to say
‘I want to have critical enquiry of particular kinds’?
What is the nature of that in the particular context of
history? When I mentioned genetics, what I was trying
to point out is that the confidence that these young
children have with ‘scientific facts and truths’ deeply
puzzles me. It comes from a larger scientific discourse.
I remember listening to a certain biologist who began
a talk by saying, ‘Twenty million years ago, this was the
way things were, and then something happened two
million years after that, and then again something hap-
pened . . .’. I wondered how I don’t even remember
exactly what I did an hour ago while this biologist was
so confident about what happened twenty million years
ago! I am not getting into whether he is right or
wrong. But his confidence in effortlessly talking about
the way it really was millions of years ago was astound-
ing! I don’t think any other discipline comes close to
doing that. And that is transferred into the textbooks.
I am only talking in the context of critical enquiry here—so, obviously we have to teach them science, because science is important. Presumably the science community will decide what should be taught and that is OK. But it is taught in a way in which students think that they have understood the whole world through these facts of particular kinds. We have not trained them to ask the question: This may well be true, but what does it mean when I just say it? That is all. I was not talking about alternate science at all. For me, I want to push this point of critical enquiry into saying that it always has to be self-critical, that is an awareness from your own processes which you are doing within your discipline. That, I think, is the most we can ask.

Sukanya Mitra. I teach History at Loreto College. I have two things to ask you. One is regarding this concept of yuga, the concept of cyclical time in India—the Kalyug and Satyug. How can one use that as a method of writing history? The other: You have spoken of time being thought of in terms of spatial metaphors. We can also think about space in temporal metaphors. For example, if I see a house, I think that this house belongs to a particular period. So, what are your thoughts on that?

Sarukkai. The second one quickly because there is a lot of work that cognitive scientists have done on that—they have all very clearly concluded, based on their experiments, that there is definitely an asymmetry in representation. That is, we always tend to represent time in terms of space much more than we tend to represent space in terms of time. This could be due to various reasons. What this also points out is that, what we call knowledge about something, about anything in the world, is influenced by our body structures. Now, this is something which is a very big problem of larger
notions of modernist methods. I am using a very broad framework here—where the question of the body location is removed from the eye of the observer. The person who is discovering and talking about the knowledge of the world—let’s say, I can discover the gravity law—my body doesn’t really have a role to play in it. In fact, it is the removal of your location which is so central to modernist epistemologies. Without it, you cannot have the kind of modernist possibilities that we talk about. But what we are seeing in the context of time and space is that the body is very centrally located in its production of knowledge about something and that really changes everything. I think it has very important questions for history—whether historians would be interested in it is another issue. But it has very important implications of how to define forms of historical knowledge.

And the first question—people have often pointed out that there are cyclical theories of time in other cultures and, therefore, it suggests different forms of history and so on. The real problem is this: For history, should there be a need to make a commitment that time is real? If I have to make a commitment that there is something called time, then the nature of that thing influences the kind of history that I do. Or is history possible without being an agnostic about the reality of time? The point about cyclical time is interesting because it points towards a completely different process. And as I said, this is the work I have just finished with my colleague Gopal Guru, on the origin of the notion of re-birth in the context of caste, where our view is that this is a particular process of social time. Every society defines itself through a process of time. It is very interesting—you can, like we saw about culture, point out what conceptions of time define your cultural
epochs. You will find very interesting definitions of time and the kind of conceptions of time that form our society today, for example—‘time is money’, ‘you can’t waste time’, points about leisure, relationship between time and labour—all of which came post-Industrial Revolution. So these, including cyclical time, are cultural constructions of time.

**Kallol Gupta.** I am a scientist at Oxford University. Thanks a lot for two reasons—one, it was great; two, it did not make me feel like a fish out of water for once since you are drawing parallels between science and history. I was just curious about one thing—one of the things that happened in the field of science at the turn of the century is that we became empiricist from rationalist. So, we don’t just rationalize things. Once we rationalize a theory towards an answer, we put data up front, and because data is infallible, our proof is infallible. So, a church cannot get up and say that it is the sun that revolves around the world, because we have data to show that it does not. So I was thinking, if someone can develop a quantitative framework while you are teaching history? The advantage of that would be that tomorrow, based on whoever comes in power, they cannot change history just like they cannot change scientific facts any more. I would love to have your thoughts on this.

**Audience Member.** I would like to tag on one question at the end of this—we know that history has multiple methods but I would just like your view on whether history have a singular method? Would it benefit if history had more of a structure? I think one of the weaknesses of the subject is the lack of structure perhaps.

**Sarukkai.** No, I don’t think so. Philosophers are notorious for not committing to any answer, but I will. I really
don’t think that one method, for any discipline, can suffice, and it is not only about history. Because—this is a crucial point, and our scientist friend will not be so happy with me after I give this answer—the notion of ‘method’ in science itself is in fact multiple. There is an ideal picture of scientific method and that is part of my reaction to a very simplistic reading of science and scientific method in the context of objective knowledge systems. For example, pictorial cognition plays a very important role in scientific method. Just the way in which human eyes see mathematical symbols and the influences and the meaning they read into them. There is lots of exciting work being done about the complexity of methods which define even the activity. That is where science is far more creative, I think. But the question that you are asking about whether it can be connected, I am not going to say anything about history—because I am the last person who should in a room filled with eminent historians. All I can say is that the picture, that data which can support a hypothesis conclusively, is itself (some people may say) wrong in science. And this is the famous Duhem–Quine thesis which gives many examples of the fact that the same data can be used to support contradictory theories. A very good example is Ptolemy and Copernicus data—almost the same data that Ptolemy uses when he says that earth is at the centre, Copernicus uses to say that the sun is. So, the implication of the Duhem–Quine thesis is: what you recognize as data is very often influenced by the theory that you already hold. The data is not independent of the presuppositions and the theoretical structures you hold. The data doesn’t come outside the theory and support the theory—they are far more intertwined. That does not mean that we cannot
proceed further, we can. But, there are very good reasons to believe that the relationship between data and support of evidence for a hypothesis is far more complex. And, in the case of history, it is more natural that we can draw all these multiple and rich thoughts about the question and its relation to hypothesis and bring it within history-teaching and history-learning.

All I am asking (as I do wherever I talk in social science departments) is: Why don’t you teach philosophy instead of social science? I don’t think it answers anything very meaningfully, but it does open up ways of thinking about these questions in a rich and complex way.

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Let me begin by saying that I am really pleased to be back here—I was at one of these conferences a couple of years ago and it was a very gratifying experience. I have a particular affinity for the history teachers of Calcutta schools because when I was at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences here several years ago, we ran a weekend workshop for history teachers for two years. I begin by saying this because that was when I was a bit more optimistic. What I am going to present today is a much more pessimistic view with the intention of producing some discussion. And my work has been made very easy because my turn comes at the end of a day of very rich presentations—Professor Romila Thapar’s in particular, because she said that there are so many different perspectives on the past that need to be acknowledged. Though she did also admit that it was not going to be an easy thing to incorporate all those perspectives into a single textbook. However, I fear she may not approve of the conclusion I have drawn from that observation.

I am, therefore, going to be a little irreverent to begin with. I am taking a few quotations from a really lovely
send-up of a school textbook written in 1930 and which continues to be a bestseller. Needless to say, it is mostly about British history, but I have chosen the one paragraph that talks about the British connection with India:

It was in the 18th century that the Indian history started. Indian history is a great number of wars in which the English fought victoriously against the Waratah Confederacy and various kinds of potentates called Sahibs, Wallahs, Jaha, Rajahs, Hurrahjahs, Mahurrajahs, Jhams and Jhelhies.

This would not pass in today’s India. In case you thought that they were being imperialist and racist, here’s the next part. Look what it says about the Industrial Revolution:

During the wars, many very remarkable discoveries and inventions were made. Most memorable among these was the discovery (made by all the rich men of England at once) that women and children could work for twenty-five hours a day in factories without many of them dying or becoming excessively deformed. This was known as the Industrial Revolution and completely changed the faces of the North of England.

And, if you’ll indulge me, one more little comment on Woodrow Wilson’s peace to end all wars, ‘the peace to end peace’:

And they say, though there were several battles in the war, none were so terrible or costly as the Peace which was signed afterwards in the ever-memorable Chamber of Horrors at Versailles. One of the points that President Wilson insisted on was—that the world should be made safe for democracy, that is, anyone except pillion riders, pedestrians, foreigners, natives, capitalists, communists, Jews, riffs, RAFs, gunmen, policemen, peasants, pheasants, Chinese, etc.
Why am I starting with this? I am starting with this because I am striking a very pessimistic note. There was a time—when I was in school—when you could follow D. N. Kundra’s history textbook in school and safely say that Ashoka or Pulakesi or Krishnadevaraya or Serfoji II or a myriad of other good kings planted trees, built roads and established \textit{chatrams}, and you were assured of a few marks in the exam. I will, never in my lifetime, be able to even attempt to write a send-up of Indian history in this way. Apart from the fact that I don’t have these extremely well-developed skills at raising a laugh, we will never have this version of \textit{1066 and All That}, even though we have enough in our past to sustain an all-night stand-up comedy. Imagine the fun we could have with Muhammad bin Tughlaq! But I can also imagine the mob gathering outside my department if I dare to raise a laugh or two about the Tamil Nadu government deciding in June 2018 that the state textbooks will stick to Before Christ (BC) and Anno Domini (AD) rather than Before the Christian Era in order to prevent the historical mistake of offending their minorities. This was a decision taken soon after the textbooks had been printed, in which CE and BCE had been used.

So, that was the fun part.

I am going to strike a very different note from the heavy, weighty kind of presentations we have had so far. What is in our textbooks, I am going to argue, is therefore not an agreed-upon account of the past. One is reminded here of a very evocative paragraph in Pierre Nora’s article ‘Between Memory and History’ in which he refers to the book \textit{Le Tour de la France par deux enfants}, written in 1877 by G. Bruno (a pseudonym used by a woman named Augustine Fouillée) and instrumental in training the memories of millions of French boys and girls. Eventually in the article, Pierre Nora says, ‘Thanks to it, the Minister
of Public Instruction could draw his pocket watch at 8:05 A.M. and declare, “All of our children are crossing the Alps.”—because you knew they were studying history in school, they were reading the same book, and you could predict that they were taking this tour at exactly 8:05 that morning. So a single language and a unified territory made the French history textbook a sovereign text all the way up to the eve of the First World War—almost five decades. It is still in publication, and still a bestseller. But in a place like India, a veritable Republic of Babel, has it not always been an account of the past according to one or another type of government in power?

The textbook has become—I was going to say an ‘embattled object’, but I will change that and say—an ‘endangered object’. The love of the past in India today is the stuff of battles in courtrooms, streets and movie theatres rather than seminars, classrooms and journals. Historical knowledge is something that everybody passionately and deeply engages with, especially in India—I would say that this is a particularly sub-continental affliction. So the professional historian is himself/herself something of a bit of an endangered species too because the historical method seems to have no place in this ‘love of the past’. So I can end my talk right here by saying that maybe we should all only teach English history, Russian history or Chinese history because it is no longer safe to try and attempt to teach Indian history—but I won’t say that!

Instead, I would like to say something on which I do not expect agreement—a single, teachable past in India is no longer possible. I will differ, therefore, from our former president Pranab Mukherjee who recently, in little over twenty-seven minutes, wove the myth of a single, teachable, usable past in his address to the Sangh Shiksha Varg of the RSS on 7 June 2018. You have all watched that speech, I don’t need to remind you of its content. It’s 5000 years of
unity, universities of Nalanda and Takshashila were shining for 800 years starting from 6th century BC despite all the conquests we have had and so on. He did end on the note of our constitutional patriotism, but by that time the damage had been done—because he was basically glorifying sameness when he waxed eloquent about ancient India before dismissing the entire medieval period by saying, ‘Muslim invaders then came and ruled India for 600 years’.

First, let me make my argument about why I believe that the Indian history textbook is no longer a possibility. I am basing it on a number of challenges we are facing today, challenges from within the discipline as many people are coming to an understanding that they need to know their own past. Different regions, different histories, different castes, the South, the North-East, the tribals, the Dalits, the women are asking questions like ‘Why not?’, ‘Where were we?’, ‘What if?’ I am going to give you a few examples from the Kannada University at Hampi: a member of the group infamously labelled the ‘criminal tribes’ wishes to study the origins of this appellation—where that term came from, how they got classified as a ‘criminal tribe’ etc. Or an Iruliga student (Iruligas are snake-catchers) writing a history of his community in and around Ramanagara. These are very local histories, these are very local questions emerging from what they are asking themselves but they are questions that our history books do not appear to be adequately answering. A student from an agricultural background researching the history of early modern agrarian relations in Chitradurga, a person studying the roots of under-development in the Hyderabad-Karnataka region, and another studying the history of the Bal Basappa performing cult and its message of equality are some more examples. So, you can see that there is a wide range of things, local histories being examined, investigated and written about because the histories of India are found wanting. The conventional histo-
ries do not explain to many of these people who she was and why she got where she was. So that was a task for which she had to develop or fashion new methodologies. I am not going into the methodology question right now but, rather, will identify the challenges from outside the profession.

I would like to point to the wide range of communities that wish to claim individual historical figures as figures belonging to their community and, therefore, above the critical historical method. In short, nothing critical can be said about the lives of these figures. So the historical figure—these are actual historical figures in many cases—have become one whom conventional historians’ histories have misrepresented, and therefore cannot be spoken of except by a devoted member of the community concerned. Sangolli Rayanna, for instance, can only be depicted by the Kurubas; Kittur Chennamma can only be depicted by the Lingayats and so on. I don’t know if this is a particular predicament in Karnataka alone, but perhaps you will recognize some common features for other regions of India as well.

I had contributed to the NCERT books of 2006. In particular, I had contributed a chapter on clothing which had a five-paragraph reference to the famous history of the Breast Cloth disturbances in Travancore, southern Tamil Nadu, in the nineteenth century. This section came in for a huge amount of political flak in 2012, six years after the book was published. I have written about that experience because it taught me what professional historians can no longer do. It taught me the limits of our capacity to intervene in questions that are so highly and deeply politicized. So, that is the second kind of challenge that I see to the historical profession and, therefore, to the history books.
The third challenge we are witnessing at this moment is from above—the state and its obligations. Of course we are very familiar with the central government and its preoccupations, especially in the past four years. But each state government has its own preoccupations. The preoccupations of the recently ended Congress government, for example. Surprisingly, it included a chapter in the Karnataka school-level textbook on the value of folklore as a historical source. Now, the inclusion of an entire chapter on the value of folklore as a historical source is not a bad thing, but it just stuck out there like a sore thumb! It hadn’t been thought through in terms of its connection with the other kinds of discussions of sources. There was no such discussion—it was just the ambition of that particular textbook committee. I am giving you a completely different kind of example from the ones we are more familiar with, to point out how whimsical the addition of chapters and themes and so on in history books has been, often driven by certain kinds of compulsions of the state. There is a pathological obsession today with history, from which we discern the characteristic of the Hindu Right. But it draws upon a very long preoccupation with history over the last 150 years or so. Let us not by any means be deluded into thinking that this invocation of hurt sentiments (of which I gave an example a moment ago—the instance in Tamil Nadu) is not something new—it has been happening at least since the beginning of the emergence of the textbook in the nineteenth century in India, with the British particularly warm towards entertaining various kinds of claims of hurt sentiments in the course of textbook production. It has more or less become the norm, as it were.

Finally, we have a new kind of challenge—the technological challenge to the history textbook. The textbook is no longer the only source for understanding history. Rather, that most people are consulting ‘WhatsApp university’ for
answers to many of their questions. There is a multitude of Internet sources flooded with dubious assertions, alarming claims, calls to battle on real and imagined historical heroes and heroines and wrongs and rights. So WhatsApp university is, of course, the most important place of information gathering.

Now, if the textbook is not doing that task of conveying one ‘agreed-on’ account of the past, then what else can the textbook do? We are living through what I think is perhaps the most dangerous time which is insisting on the single, usable, teachable past. So we are perhaps also at the best point to intervene and say that there is a power to telling multiple stories.

Regarding the list of examples that I promised you—these are historical heroes who are very seriously claimed by specific communities. You cannot speak about Kanakadasa without being approved by the Kuruba Sangha; whether Sangolli Rayanna is a Bedara Nayaka or a Kuruba is still being debated. So there is a virtual monopoly on the historical knowledge related to these figures. Kempegowda and even Kuvempu—noted Kannada writer of the twentieth century, winner of the Jnanpith Award—are claimed by the Vokkaligas. Koti and Chennaya, the Tuluva twin heroes from the sixteenth century, are claimed by the Billavas. I could give you innumerable examples of such ‘owning’, but I am just trying to demonstrate to you that there is this kind of claim which is being made to certain historical figures. They are acting as gatekeepers of knowledge about these historical figures which makes it virtually impossible to say anything about them, particularly in the textbooks. Should they be added? Should they be left out? Should only that be said which has been approved by the community?

I want to cite here an author you are all probably familiar with—Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie who has
talked about ‘the danger of a single story’. I am only quoting one little excerpt from her talk: ‘Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.’ This morning we had a discussion, and I think it was a very important one, about the necessity for narrative. It is perhaps how we are losing our battle as professional historians—because of our insistence on the protocols of evidence rather than focusing on as compelling a narrative as other kinds of groups lay claim to. Stories are necessary and multiple stories are extremely necessary particularly in a country like India.

So, I am going to invite you to share with me a reverie about method. To say that perhaps what we can do as teachers of history is to encourage certain kinds of historical thinking. It really does not matter what kinds of historical examples we take up in order to demonstrate the value of historical thinking. I have chosen one little clip. There are many associations in the United States which are engaged in historical thinking. I have argued elsewhere that perhaps we have spent too much time in the immediate post-Independence decades talking about the necessity of scientific temper, and it is perhaps necessary, and important, for us as historians to insist on the necessity over historical temper. If we insisted on historical temper, what would those elements of historical temper be? I am going to share with you a video that has been prepared to think about the elements of critical thinking and thinking historically.

It was convenient for me to use that because it is so beautifully put in just the space of seven and a half minutes. I want to suggest that the 2006 NCERT textbook in fact achieved what is being proposed—it allowed students an opportunity to compare contradictory sources. (I am talking
about the CBSE syllabus. I know most of you here probably teach ICSE board, so you may not be familiar with NCERT books. If you aren’t, then please quickly try to find and look at them because they are in grave danger of being removed.) Those textbooks helped actually develop historical thinking using, of course, critical moments in the Indian and international—global—historical past.

Having said that, I feel it is increasingly difficult now to achieve any kind of an agreement about what goes into those textbooks because NCERT textbooks, as many of my colleagues will testify, have been subject to innumerable queries, demands, changes that were requested, demanded and so on. And they have been at the forefront just like I was in the case of the ‘clothing’ chapter. Therefore, I think what we can do is to present historical thinking and its value as much more important in the classrooms, regardless of the examples we have taken.

Let me end hoping to provoke some discussions about a series of remarkable videos made by Deepa Dhanraj, an Indian filmmaker in Karnataka for the Karnataka government. It is a marvellous series of nine videos called Young Historians. I am going to show you only six minutes of one of the videos to demonstrate what is possible in a classroom in terms of developing critical thinking as well as historical thinking. Here it has been done with very young underprivileged children, all nine years old, from scheduled castes in the district of Gadag in northern Karnataka.²

This is, of course, not possible in all classrooms, we know that very well and we have compulsions of taking exams and so on. But I think the time has come for us to dream differently about what we can do in our classrooms. One of the experiences I have had when I was taking these workshops in Calcutta in the early 2000s with teachers from different types of schools—not just the more well-
known schools like Modern High School and so on but also Chetla Boys’ School and many other government schools—was that they all felt they could experiment with the textbooks and with the syllabus up to eighth grade. But after the eighth grade, they had to focus on the board exams. So the exam drove the pedagogical purpose of the classes from the ninth grade onwards. Now, that is something we cannot do anything about, but there are certain spaces and ways in which perhaps we can raise this question of whether we can create a historical temper which involves thinking historically, thinking critically, using perhaps examples from everyday life and those things around us and not necessarily the big national questions that are engrossing people in the government and outside it.

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7jABcz593E
2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAwtZbrdA1Q
QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION

Kanupriya Jhunjhunwala. I am currently a doctoral student at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, but I also do research and education. We’ve spoken a lot about the connection between history and culture, and now we have come into the classroom. But we rarely discuss the culture of schools and how children get socialized into culture within schools. And that a lot of that cultural socialization happens outside the school also. Most of it, in fact. The schools seem almost to sanitize culture in a way, as if they want to keep it out, for the very reason you have been talking about—that there cannot be ‘a’ particular culture. Culture in most schools is limited to a sort of celebration of festivals of all faiths, very superficial experiences like that. I have two related questions. One, that history is intricately related with culture but when we teach history in schools, that connection is rarely made besides ‘this was the architecture in the period and these dance forms emerged in this period and these musicians were popular in this period’ and things like that. Why is that and what can be done? The other question: the socialization into culture that happens at home, and the dichotomy between the school and the home in this regard. It is almost this sense of permanence when families socialize children into culture. So whatever is culturally relevant has always existed, it has always been like this. There is this sense of forever-ness and no room for questioning: ‘This is our culture today. But, when did it start being this way?’

Nair. I am going to respond by saying something which I should have said but I think I only hinted at: that there is a difference between the role played, say, by the
textbook and the classroom in the urban setting, and perhaps I can even qualify that further by saying urban-middle-class setting, as opposed to a setting like perhaps the one we saw—the rural school where the textbook is the only resource. There is a big difference. At least as far as the urban elite or even non-elite schools are concerned, a lot of learning about history is happening outside. I was being facetious when I said WhatsApp university—that is a recent challenge—social media, so on and so forth, but the fact is that historical opinions are formed outside of learning within schools. In fact, I think, judging from the feedback that we got on the NCERT books from not just teachers but also parents who had had conversations with their children who were taking exams, myself included, there was real fear among the students about the opinions that were already formed—for example, about 1857 and the causes of the 1857 rising compared to what the new textbooks were trying to do, which was making them think about sources, different kinds of participants in 1857, and so on.

The fear came from the fact that they felt they would be penalized because the teacher herself was very frequently saying that this was not exactly the case. There were two kinds of responses—one, where the teacher would say ‘We know better and we are going to tell you what the answer to this question should be!’ The other was, of course, the ever-present threat of the board exam and how you had to answer it. So, very frequently things were edited out of those books, anything thought of as intended to produce doubt and querying and criticality, in order to prepare the students for the exam. In another setting, that is perhaps the only source of some understanding of the history of India and that
is why I gave the examples of the students who are the first-generation higher-education entrants and coming to Hampi University with the intention to research their histories. They are coming to higher education and genuinely want to produce an account of the history of their circumstances and their lives and their cultures in ways that make the learning of Indian history meaningful. So, that is going on too. It is not just a unidirectional process. I suppose I can’t answer it in terms of resolving that dilemma, but there is a very productive tension that remains between the received knowledge of the textbook and the already-existing knowledges that are brought into the classroom by either teachers or the influence of parents on their children and the kind of dilemmas and questions they produce. It is particularly acute in India because of the unevenness of this whole process as well.

Srilika Chatterjee. I’d like to not ask a question but share an experience. It is not that the schools cannot take any initiative in adopting an alternative perspective of teaching history, because, last year, my school—Vidyashilp Academy—had collaborated with Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore and included the ninth-grade students in an oral-history project about Bangalore. The main objective from the school’s perspective—from the school management and the teachers—was not just to show that an alternative way of teaching history can be sought but also to create a social and personal connect within the school community. This was done through an oral-history project about the local people, about their own people, in such a way as to engage the ninth-grade students but without compromising on their academic calendar or routine. What I mean to say is that it is a doable thing if
we plan a little bit. Of course, if you ask me, by the end of the project, if my students gained anything academically related to the board exams, I would have to say that they did not. But I can definitely assure you they did gain something more personal and social; they were more confident; they learnt what they did not know about the maintenance staff and their teachers, the people’s stories; and the patience that each one of us should have to hear out others’ stories and thereby create a different kind of a history. Because, to us, history is a history of war, leaders, achievements and failures, but there is another history—that is the simple/common man’s history. So, that is what I wanted to share, this experience: that if the schools want, it is a doable thing. Right now, once again the current batch of ninth graders is into one more project with ReReeti, the Bangalore-based museum advisory organization. They are looking into finding out the Bangalore connection with the First World War—how far Bangaloreans have contributed, etc.

Nair. That is what I would like to pick up on, that it is doable in schools. Certain kinds of experiments are possible and perhaps necessary in the current times. For students to be equipped to deal with the kinds of dilemmas we are facing in the debates regarding history in our public life. Otherwise, they are bewildered and don’t know how to handle those conversations nor how to evaluate the evidence that is produced on opposing sides of any such debate.

Sanjay Daniel. I am from north-east Karnataka, so I felt well connected with the session and the videos. I am working for Azim Premji Foundation as a teacher/educator, and we are using the same videos in a module called ‘Perspectives in History’—there is a module of
that sort in the Guru Chetana programme. One thing that saddens us today is that, as you were mentioning, our NCERT textbooks are undergoing a lot of amendments which is our cue to interact with teachers—to talk to government teachers and the NCERT teachers especially. All day today we have heard a lot of things, that, for example, more interpretive knowledge is required in order to understand historical aspects. In our DSCERT textbooks, especially from Karnataka state board, we tend to rely more on facts and dates. So we do sessions with the teachers, for they are also basing their knowledge and epistemology on the textbooks they have, and try to tell them that interpretation and narrative is more important. Immediately, they respond by claiming that these elements are not in the textbooks. So we try to provide them an alternative, that is, the NCERT, saying that these elements can be found, it is possible for us to do this using NCERT textbooks. So, I am slightly contradicting the statement that is usually made, that DSCERT teachers or the government teachers, the government faculty, are not accepting the new approach of NCERT, because I have spoken to many teachers who agree that this is important and necessary. So what do we do about that? Soon after that question, we are mostly silent because we tell them that our organization called Azim Premji Foundation can do a bit of it, maybe by talking to the functionaries in the department, but we are not able to do as much as can be done. So, the question is, instead of us becoming mute, how well can it be articulated to the department functionaries to build such narratives in the textbooks of the state board? You also mentioned Karnataka, so Karnataka having such a problem, what suggestions could be given?
Nair. I have no answers at all because I don’t know how you approach a state government to rewrite textbooks. But I will say this, because I received the books too late to incorporate them into this talk, that there has been—again, in Karnataka—a controversy about the social-science textbooks and history in particular for the very reason discussed this morning by my colleague Professor Kunal Chakrabarti. There is a chapter in the ninth-standard textbook which traces the historical origins of both Christianity and Islam within that one chapter. It is very brief, it is very basic, a thumbnail sketch if you will, and then, subsequently, there is a chapter which discusses various social reform movements, all of which are Hindu of course, including the very important Basaveshwara movement which led to the establishment of the Lingayat sect, now demanding religion status. There was an uproar because (again it was the Hindus) they argued that by teaching the historical origins of Islam and Christianity, you are actually trying to convert people and you have not provided a similar reading of Hinduism. In other words, something that matches and parallels the account of both, the historical origins of Islam and Christianity. So, that was one. The other thing is that—I got the books only yesterday and I had a quick look at them and it is interesting again, as my young friend just said—there is an entire chapter on Tipu Sultan and Haider Ali and it is all about the four Mysore wars. There is not a single iota of even a reflection of the huge body of extremely sophisticated work in the last 30 years on Tipu Sultan and Haider Ali by social and cultural historians, by political historians, by religious historians and new kinds of work on his life and times. Not reflected at all. It is as if there is some kind of frozen inter-state in which this textbook is stuck and it will not go beyond
providing the political history of the four Mysore wars. Not one word—it does not say anything except that they reformed their army, in a little box, the ‘Did you know?’ kind of box. It says in that box that they reformed their army on modern European lines and so on. Otherwise, no social history, cultural history, religious history of any kind—not controversial either, just the four wars. So, when we move away from NCERT towards the state boards, we are dealing with a very different kind of beast which is really the bare minimum, and badly written as well.

Chintan Girish Modi. Since history as a discipline has been hijacked by prime-time television and by WhatsApp, do you think the history teacher can now . . .

Nair. No, I think we are making a mistake by thinking that is the only thing that is happening. I hope by providing you those four types of challenges, I’ve suggested that the field is in fact much broader. There are people looking to engage with history in some meaningful sense for their own sakes and that is happening outside the ‘Hindu Right’ annexation kind of story. So, please be aware of that because there is a whole range, a whole spectrum of engagements with history. I gave the example of community history, for instance—that is not necessarily coming from the rightwing; or, the example of the Kannada Hampi University students—that is not coming from the rightwing either. There are many ways through which there is an eagerness to deal and engage with historical questions which far exceeds the academy, far exceeds the classroom, far exceeds the textbook and so on. I was, in fact, trying precisely to lay out a much broader spectrum of engagements. I hope I have communicated that. I mean I haven’t gone into each one in detail, but that’s precisely what I wanted to communicate.
Modi. I have seen the Basavanna film by Deepa Dhanraj and I think it is fantastic. I am aware of the engagements that historians have had with others. What I wanted to ask was: Would this be a good time for history educators at the school level to think about how skill-building might be a more important function than only content, because when there is so much information available in so many places, is the student not overwhelmed? How do they figure out what to believe? Are discernment and the examination of sources something that history teachers should be focusing on? That is the first question. The second is: When we know that there is no single story of India to be taught, is it possible to think in terms of histories of regions? I studied in a Maharashtra state-board school and we learnt about Shivaji for so many years that we were completely bored. But we never got to learn about histories from South India or the North-East. How do students understand the distinction between the mythical, the historical and the literary? In India, they seem to be quite closely linked.

Nair. First of all, let me correct you a little. Those seeking histories are not all historians. Some are amateurs, various kinds of people. Your first question is actually your summary of what I lectured. I was saying precisely what you said: that our role in terms of providing content is probably over and what we have to teach are skills of thinking historically.

On the question of how to distinguish, I hope that is exactly the kind of skill that we can build. We have to ask a few questions to be able to help students assess a historical source. I believe that is what the NCERT books were trying to do, and in that sense they were revolutionary in terms of allowing students a glimpse
of how historians think, evaluate sources and so on. This has to be systematically done and it has to be done by taking a lot of time—that is, qualitatively. So instead of approaching state boards to try and rewrite the textbooks, maybe we should approach state boards to say that there should be no textbooks for the first four or five years, and that we only have these kinds of inputs of thinking historically, teaching the skills for evaluating sources, encouraging students to say what they know by way of myths or epics and then talk about what distinguishes that from perhaps a historical account, and making them learn this distinction. I think those would be far more valuable, and for that there has to be some sort of demand from below. Right now, parents are certainly not interested in placing any such demand on schools or on their wards, and I am not sure if the teachers are in a position to make that kind of a demand either. But that is certainly the kind of demand that should be made. There should be no textbooks until you have to finally get to the board examinations.

**Audience Member 1.** I just wanted to consider the risks of the kind of approach we observed if it happens to be condensed in a classroom. Any kind of historical education that has been helpful to me has been so because it has been supplemented in a way by a certain conceptual understanding. So, even in the course of today, the things that have been helpful to understand how history should be looked at, for example, our words—‘periodicity’ or the ‘grand narrative’—are concepts of that kind. What I was thinking of was what the previous session cautioned us against, which is the obviousness of a certain kind of method. If we take an essentially practical approach to historiography, would that risk eliminating these conceptual supplements?—
Which I think have been most enabling for me because, coming into college and being introduced to interdisciplinarity, I think knowing these concepts has been most enabling for me to navigate history.

Nair. But did the concepts come to you from a textbook?

Audience Member 2. Yes. I think we start our history courses with the historiography and philosophy of a history course and that helps. It helps knowing that people have different perspectives about how history starts or how it should be told. I understand and I think what has enabled me in college is getting to know these concepts and, if that could be brought down to schools, I don’t think they are too difficult to be condensed into textbooks.

Nair. I can only give you the example of the conversations we had with teachers about the NCERT books. There were some very illuminating conversations and, as I said, I have had some very interesting conversations with parents about those books as well. So, here is a set of books which were remarkable in terms of achieving the capacity to help students who read them carefully to think historically and to develop those skills. There were all sorts of material there that engaged the student in thinking historically. The big gap was that it was not delivered in the classroom necessarily by the teacher the way it was intended. And that is not the fault of the teacher, because, as I said a little earlier, of the pressure of having to produce somebody ready to take an exam. So, what the teacher very frequently did—and I know this because I saw my daughter through the boards using those books—was to stop students from looking into the boxes within the books which were the alternative sources. So it once more came back to sticking to this basic narrative, underlining and mastering the
dates and the periods in which certain things happened but ignoring the sources, the more challenging boxes which asked questions, and definitely ignoring the visuals. In many cases, the visuals were simply ignored—maps, etc.—except when it came to something that would actually yield points in the exam. So, there was a way in which the impending exam seemed to actually put a seal on anything that an innovative textbook could achieve. There are many layers to this. It is not enough to have an innovative textbook. Somebody who is bright and capable of reading those books on their own, certainly benefits from them—we know many of those cases too. But for the average student who requires guidance and who, as I said, is full of fear about taking exams, teachers tend to take the easy way out.

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Kumkum Roy. I think one of the important things to keep in mind is that while this workshop is about textbooks, it is also about issues of peace and reconciliation. Maybe, somewhere, when we are looking at the textbooks, it might be useful to think about that and what is happening with those. While it may have seemed that some of us are complacent about the textbooks, I don’t think that is the case at all. Most of us are aware of how rapidly things are changing around us. And the fact that we will need multipronged responses to it. This is not something that can come on an institutional basis at the moment, but it is something we all need to think about and engage with in different ways. Perhaps there is no single formulaic response that we can offer—we need to think about different ways, different strategies of response.

One pragmatic suggestion for teachers, as a teacher, is that: there is always some space in our schools where we don’t work within an exam framework. So, when
you don’t have a board exam, you can experiment and open up things for your students in different ways. That is one quick suggestion. We need to keep in mind that many of the books we have been discussing—the NCERT books, for example, are translated into several regional languages apart from being translated into Hindi. And it is also useful to keep in mind that many schools in many states across the country use these books, either modified or in different ways, even if we don’t have access to them.

One more point I wanted to make is that we are working in a situation where there is a digital divide. So while digital media may sound accessible to many of us, they remain inaccessible especially in the government-school scenario where the majority of the most under-privileged learners study. In those spaces, digital access is not something that is easy. You will find that even in a very privileged space like JNU, something which we took for granted for a number of years, subscription to JSTOR has now been discontinued. This is just to give you an idea of where we are located in terms of digital access. So let us not minimize the importance of other modes of communication—I think, for example, that face-to-face communication remains extremely important. And as teachers we are privileged to be able to participate in face-to-face interactions with learners. To make the most of that opportunity in different ways—that is important for us.

The Ramayana is something I presume everybody is more or less familiar with—I have shared one excerpt with all of you. The other is from the Rohantamiga Jataka. That is perhaps more important and more interesting to talk about. In the case of Valmiki’s Ramayana, we are focusing on the Aranya Kanda. We are starting from when Shurpanakha sees Rama up to where Sita
is abducted by Ravana. The Ramayana we will come to later. What did you make of the reading of the Rohantamiga Jataka? Any response from the audience?

... the rope cut through his skin, flesh and his bone. Realizing his plight the Bodhisatta let out a cry so that the other deer would know that he was trapped. Hearing this, the other deer were scared, and, breaking into three groups, fled as fast as they could. Not seeing the Bodhisatta amongst them, Chitta thought: ‘My elder brother must be in distress.’ Rushing back, he saw that the Bodhisatta was indeed trapped. The Bodhisatta warned him: ‘Brother, do not stay here. Danger lurks.’ He added:

[A conversation between the two brothers]
Deer, run for your lives
Brother Chitta, you should also leave at once.
Look after the others as I used to do.
You are now their only refuge.

Rohanta, I will not go, I am here bound by love.
I will not abandon you even if I die.

Our parents are blind, they need you
Return to them, or they will die.

Rohanta, I will not go, I am here bound by love.
If you are in distress, how can I go?
I will not abandon you even if I die.

Chitta remained standing to his right, reassuring him.
Sutana, too, not being able to find her brothers, thought that both of them were in distress, and went back to the lake.

[Another conversation]
Run away, o frightened one, I am trapped.
What will you gain by waiting here?
Go quickly and look after the other deer
Just as I used to do. Why stay here?

Rohanta, I will not go, I am here bound by love.
I will not abandon you even if I die.

Our parents are blind, they need you
Return to them, or they will die.

Rohanta, I will not go, I am here bound by love.
I will not abandon you even if I die.

So she took her position to the left of Rohanta.
Seeing the deer flee, and hearing the cry of the Bodhisatta, the hunter thought that the king of the deer had been ensnared. He armed himself to slaughter the deer and arrived at the spot. Seeing him, the Bodhisatta said:

Here comes the hunter’s son, armed to the teeth
With arrow or sword, he will kill all of us.

Seeing the hunter, Chitta remained where he was. Sutana, however, fled. But then she thought, ‘Where will I go leaving my brothers behind?’ She too returned, and took her position.

Scared of the hunter, she fled, but then, she did the impossible.

She returned to face certain death along with her brothers.

When the hunter saw the three animals together, he was filled with compassion. He figured out that they were siblings. He thought: ‘The king of the deer is trapped; but these two creatures refuse to flee thinking it would be humiliating. I wonder who they are.’ So he asked:
Who are these deer to you?
They are free, while you are bound
Yet they stand by your side.
They are not afraid that they may die.

The Bodhisatta replied:

They are my brother and sister.
Risking their lives, they stand by my side.

The hunter’s heart melted when he heard the Bodhisatta. Sensing this, Chitta intervened: ‘Brother Nishada, do not think this king of ours is an ordinary deer. He is the lord of 80,000 deer. He observes the shilas, is compassionate towards all, and is wise. He looks after our blind parents, worn out with age. If you destroy him, you will in effect be destroying five lives—his, ours, and those of our parents. However, if you spare him, you will earn the merit of saving five lives. Blind and helpless, they will die of grief if they lose their son. Free my brother; save the lives of all five.’

Hearing Chitta, the hunter replied:

‘Lord, have no fear.’
I free him who serves his parents
Let them be happy with him once again.

Then he started thinking: ‘What is the use of the royal reward? If I kill this noble deer, either the earth will suck me into the deepest hell or my head will burst, split by a thunderbolt.’ Having made up his mind, he went to the great being, removed the stake, tore apart the leather thong, embraced the deer, lifted him and laid him down near the water, then gently removed the noose and carefully joined torn veins, nerves, flesh and skin. He washed away the blood, and massaged him. Soon, the wounds healed and the
injured leg looked as good as new, covered with skin and
hair. Seeing this, Chitta addressed the hunter:

Seeing the great deer liberated, I rejoice
O hunter, may you too enjoy such bliss with your near
ones.

Now the Great One thought, “Did the hunter trap me
for himself, or on instructions from someone else?” He
questioned the hunter accordingly. The hunter replied. ‘I
had no need to capture you. The chief queen, Khema,
wanted to hear you preach the dhamma, that is why I
trapped you.’ The Bodhisatta said: ‘If that is so, you have dis-
played great courage in setting me free. Come, take me to
the king, I will teach the queen about dhamma.’ The hunter
replied: ‘Lord, kings are very cruel. Who knows what will
happen if I take you there? Go wherever you please.’ The
Great Being realized that the hunter had performed an
extremely difficult task in setting him free. So he decided
to ensure that he would receive his due reward. He thought
for a while and told the hunter: ‘Brother, stroke my back.’
As soon as he did so, his palm was full of golden hair. The
hunter asked ‘Lord, what should I do with this?’ The Bod-
hisatta replied ‘Show this to the king and queen and tell
them: “these are the hairs of the golden deer.”’ Then, recite
the verses that I teach you for the queen. The moment she
hears them, her desires will be quenched.’ Saying this, he
taught him ten verses on the dhamma and the five shilas,
before bidding him goodbye.

Shabana Anwar. I am a teacher-educator at the Modern
Academy of Continuing Education. If I were to teach
this story to Class 3 or Class 2 or even narrate it to pre-
schoolers in nursery, I would focus on how a very
violent situation was solved by using sweet words. It is
possible to use words to negotiate and to come out of
any situation without using violence—I would focus on that.

One day, Khema devi had a dream at dawn. She dreamt that a golden deer was seated on a golden seat, and was instructing her about dhamma. The deer’s voice was as sweet as the tinkling of golden anklets. She was listening to him, spellbound, when suddenly, the deer rose and left. As she woke up, she shouted; ‘Get hold of the deer.’ Her maids laughed when they heard her. They thought: “All the windows and doors are firmly shut; and yet the mistress wants us to catch some deer!” The queen also understood that she had seen a dream. She thought: “If I tell the king that I saw a dream, he will not pay me any attention. However, if I say that this is my craving because of my pregnancy, he will definitely try and fulfill my desire.” Having made up her mind, and being determined to hear the golden deer, she pretended to be in agony, and lay down. The king came and asked her, ‘Dear, are you ill?’ Khema replied: ‘No, but I have a wish.’ ‘What is it, my dear?’ ‘I want to hear words of dhamma from the mouth of a golden deer.’ ‘Dear, why do you wish for the impossible? There is no such thing as a golden deer.’ ‘If my wish is not fulfilled, I will die here and now.’ Saying this, she turned her back to the king.

Audience. I found a similarity between the Ramayana story where Sita wants that golden deer. The woman is lusting for something and that is what leads to a kind of conflict. That is what I found common when I was reading both the stories and the symbol of the golden deer. That is what they are running after.

Shukuna Mukherjee. To me they come across as conveying a set of moral values. The most important being the victory of concern for others over greed. It really fascinated me because in today’s world, values like tol-
erance, patience, concern for others—they are receding into the background where our self-interest is what we really need to fulfil.

O khattiya king, if you serve your parents according to dhamma in this world, you will attain heaven.

O khattiya king, if you look after your wife and children according to dhamma in this world, you will attain heaven.

O khattiya king, if you look after your friends and ministers according to dhamma in this world, you will attain heaven.

O khattiya king, if you engage in yuddha and yatra (wars and tours) according to dhamma in this world, you will attain heaven.

O khattiya king, if you look after your subjects (praja) in both town and village according to dhamma in this world, you will attain heaven.

O khattiya king, if you take care of the paura-janapada (people in the town and countryside) according to dhamma in this world, you will attain heaven.

O khattiya king, if you pay respects to samanas (wandering ascetics) and Brahmins according to dhamma in this world, you will attain heaven.

O khattiya king, if you treat lesser creatures according to dhamma in this world, you will attain heaven.

O khattiya king, if you serve your parents according to dhamma in this world, you will attain heaven

Follow dhamma, o lord, this is the source of all happiness.

If you follow dhamma in this world, you will attain heaven.

May you never swerve from the path of dhamma.
Even the gods such as Indra attained heaven by practicing dhamma.

Kings in the past, who followed this advice, who were dutiful and disciplined, attained heaven.

**Aatreyee Ghosh.** I am a student of literature, so I see it in a very different way. For me, the entire narrative was a little problematic for the simple reason that I found the women characters rather flimsy. ‘I want to run away’, then ‘I don’t want to run away’! Most importantly, we have Khema who wants to listen to the 10 Dhammas. When you end up listening to the Dhammas, they are very male-centric. Yet, she seems to be pretty happy just listening to that. It has nothing for her and yet it is supposed to satisfy her longing for it—I found that very problematic.

**Sneha Ganguly.** I have just completed my BA. My comments are a continuation of Athvi’s. I found the women characters strange too, especially the queen—she wanted to listen to the Dhamma. But when she went to the king, she said she had had a dream and wanted a golden deer. There is a conflict of interest over here. It is not the king who says: These are your rewards—it is the queen who does that. I too found it a very male-centric Dhamma, yet the queen seems so satisfied with it. Somehow I could not relate to that aspect of it. But one thing I really liked is that despite the screaming matches and fistfights, it preaches a very peaceful way of resolving things—things can be done in a better way if we just listen to each other rather than by shouting and screaming.

**Roy.** I think I should start off with some of the issues you have raised and some of the issues which came to my mind when I set up this comparison. I was looking at these two texts using the schema that A. K. Ramanujan
had set up in his essay ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation’. I had mentioned that as part of the reading. His essay became a bestseller in Delhi once it was thrown out of the syllabus of Delhi University. Also, because we have been talking about politics and history teaching, it is important to remember that this happened during the UPA 2 government. What Ramanujan was doing in that essay, apart from what attracted controversy, was to try and set up a strategy for comparing different narratives. And he was suggesting that if you have narratives which use more or less similar imagery, ideas, etc., they have an ‘iconic relationship’. That was the first category he used. The second was when he said that they are more or less similar but they are doing different things with the imagery. Then it becomes indexical, and you have a ‘symbolic relationship’.

And the argument I would try to put forward is the relationship between Valmiki’s Ramayana (in Sanskrit) and the Rohantamiga Jataka (which has come down to us in Pali, but could have been told in various languages as indeed the Ramayana might have been too).

As some of you have already pointed out, there is a parallel between Sita and Khema as well as differences. The golden deer figures in both narratives but very differently. The same is true of the forest. You have three possible strategies of reading these two texts together and it is important to see that they are not simply ‘this’ or ‘that’—there can be an overlap amongst the three categories. If we look at these two narratives, we can see that there are conflicts relating to three or four central and overlapping issues. One, you have different notions of kingship and, for those of us who have been thinking about these texts as male-centric, it is useful
to think of different kinds of patriarchies, different forms of patriarchy. Not of patriarchy as one monolithic block. And what does that tell us about strategies of survival for men, women, others, etc.? Different ways in which political relations are defined, ways in which they are valorized—what is regarded as significant?

Both the texts talk about varna–jati relationships in different ways. Many historians have read the Rakshasas as people who are outside the varna–jati framework and, therefore, representing an alternative to a varna–jati system. The Nishada (according to the Brahmanical reckoning) would have been at the very bottom of the varna–jati hierarchy and yet, as we can see, in the Rohantamiga Jataka, the Nishada has a central role to play—the Nishada is, in fact, a key figure. Then, of course, you have gender relations. Operating at one level between brothers and sisters—in the Ramayana, Shurpanakha, when she is in trouble, appeals to her brothers; and in the Rohantamiga Jataka, when the Bodhisatta Rohanta is in trouble, although he doesn’t appeal, it is the brother and sister who, in a sense, come to his rescue. So, different relationships between brothers and sisters represented in these narratives. And, of course, the husband–wife relationship—whether it is Rama and Sita, or, by extension, Lakshmana and Sita, or, in the Rohantamiga Jataka, Khema and Brahmadatta who is her husband, the king.

You also have this negotiation taking place between the forest and the settled world. In Valmiki’s Ramayana, we know that Rama represents the settled world. His exile into the forest is viewed as a marker of punishment in some ways, so it is something he has to negotiate, he has to handle in different ways. The Rakshasas are very much the people of the forest, though we have reference to a very splendid city in
Lanka. On the other side, in the Rohantamiga Jataka, we can see that the deer are the enlightened beings who reside in the forest, and it is from them that the Nishada (or the hunter) acquires the message that he does—the message of Dhamma—and carries it back to the king’s court. So, the centre of learning, in a sense, is destabilized—it shifts from the urban centre, from the royal court, to the forest and it is from the wisdom of the forest that the court is ultimately saved and re-established. There are all these elements that are important to look at.

Now, the narrative of the Ramayana. I will quickly run through it to refresh our memories of it. We have a description of Shurpanakha’s.

Rama was handsome, the Rakshasa woman was ugly, he was shapely and slim of waist, she, misshapen and pot-bellied; his eyes were large, hers were beady, his hair was jet black, and hers the colour of copper; he always said just the right thing and in a sweet voice, her words were sinister and her voice struck terror; he was young, attractive, and well mannered, she, ill mannered, repellent, an old hag. And yet the god of love, who comes to life in our bodies had taken possession of her, and so she addressed Rama: ‘Your hair is matted in the manner of ascetics, yet you have a wife with you and bear bow and arrows. How is it that you have come into this region, the haunt of raksasas?’

Now, I want to pause for a minute. Rama is supposed to be a Kshatriya, he has a wife yet he is disguised as an ascetic and this act of pretence is something we come across in different ways in the narrative. Maricha is a Rakshasa who adopts asceticism and then transforms into the deer. When Ravana approaches Sita, he too approaches her as a mendicant, as a Brahman. So you have this play of the idea of people pretending to
be what they are not. And while Rama is not supposed to be pretending, there is nevertheless an ambivalence about the way in which he is represented. What is also interesting and incidental is that when Shurpanakha describes Sita, she refers to her as ‘asati’. Now, those of us who are familiar with any of the Indian languages know that the term ‘sati’ carries enormous value and weight. So, referring to Sita as ‘asati’ is the height of abuse, as it were. The commentators have speculated on why Shurpanakha is using this term—it is because she finds Sita with two men. Which is the idea that seems to be playing on the mind of the poet. Once again, it gives us an idea about gender relations and the ways in which they were structured.

Now, Rama’s response to Shurpanakha. Shurpanakha is serious about what she says, but Rama’s response is ‘in jest’. He is mocking her, making fun of her. He sends her off to Lakshmana, saying that he is eligible to marry her. Lakshmana responds that he is like a slave, his wife will be a slave as well—again a telling commentary on gender relations. The wife would obviously be the slave of her husband, and, by definition, of any man related to her husband. Ultimately, Rama orders Lakshmana to disfigure Shurpanakha—a standard punishment—and her nose and ears are cut off. You have all this happening in the forest. What Shurpanakha does in response is to go to her brother. Not her brother Ravana but her other brother Khara who lives in the forest. And one of the things she asks for is to drink the blood of these three. We can also note the intertextuality here: in the Mahabharata, Draupadi wants the blood of the men who have humiliated her. There is a parallel, but because this is framed as the desire of a Rakshasi woman, it is not something that is fulfilled. You have a legitimate desire for
vengeance and an illegitimate desire for vengeance being classified within the tradition. And then you have a long and gory battle that goes on for 13 sargas/cantos—from sarga 18 to 30. The description of the battle is vivid: it is fought with hammers, spears, pikes and keen battle axes, swords and javelins, discuses, lances and terrible clubs and massive bows, bludgeons, harpoons held high, the 14 dreaded Rakshasas marched out from Janasthana, obedient to the will of Khara, to kill one man.

All of them are destroyed and there is a very bleak description of the death of Khara. All of them lie in blood. His soldiers lie in pools of blood, hair streaming wild, lie on the earth like grass upon a broad altar. And, because the forest is filled with dead Rakshasas, it is made bloody with their blood and torn flesh. In an instant, it becomes a place of utter terror, a vision of hell itself. You can see how graphically the conflict is described in this text. This is a minor conflict as it were; nonetheless, it is something that received considerable attention. Khara goes out to fight but he is described as a deer in front of the lion. Rama is the lion and Khara is the deer. Once again, very vivid imagery. When Khara is killed, Shurpanakha approaches Ravana and reminds him of his duties as a king, and this reminder is somewhat similar to the notion of kingship in the Dharmashastra and the Arthashastra. Ravana is described as the king who, given to pleasures of different kinds, fails to recognize the proper time and place to do things. Nor does he weigh the pros and cons in situations. All these things are held against him. He does not send spies into the forest, he does not know what is happening there. He is described as worthless as clouds of dust—or even more worthless than clouds of dust—because he obviously is incapable of defending
his realm. So, Shurpanakha, in a sense, invites him into trouble and incites him to vengeance. She describes Rama, Lakshmana and Sita and she tells Ravana to take Sita as his wife. So, you have a brother–sister relationship here, but it is a relationship where the sister is inciting the brother into a course of events which will lead to destruction. In that sense, once again, it is different from the narrative that we have in the Rohantamiga Jataka.

Ravana then decides to use Maricha who takes the form of the golden deer. There is a very idyllic, peaceful description of the forest within which Maricha lives, and, although he is a Rakshasa, he is practising asceticism. He tries to dissuade Ravana from the course of action but Ravana says that what he is doing is a command—‘I in particular resemble the gods’. So, he claims to be equal to Agni, Indra, Yama, Varuna—all the Vedic deities. And because he is so powerful, he says that his decision should hold and that Maricha should obey him blindly.

I will just read out the description of the deer from this text.

The deer’s horns were tipped with rare gems, his face mottled dark and light, one part like pink lotuses and the other like blue. His ears were like sapphires or blue lotuses, his neck gently elongated, his belly gleaming sapphire. His flanks were like the pale velvety madhuka flower, the rest golden lotus shoots, and his hooves glowed cat’s-eye beryl. He was slim and slender of leg and brilliantly crowned with the tail tinged with every colour of the rainbow. He was studded with all sorts of precious stones that lent him a glossy and captivating hue. In an instant, the Rakshasa had changed himself into this magnificent deer.
So, if readers are familiar with both the narratives, they will see the parallels in the descriptions of the deer. They will notice that even though the deer in the Rohantamiga Jataka is not described so elaborately, there are echoes of it over here. Now what is interesting, of course, is that Sita is the one who is entrapped rather than the deer—the deer is the one that ensnares her. Rama is initially not deceived but Sita wants the deer at all costs and, unlike Khema, she wants the deer because she wants to show it off when they return to Ayodhya. Even if the deer is killed, she says its golden hide will make an excellent seat for them. Rama ultimately concurs, saying that kings do hunt, they hunt for sport as well as for meat, and he too is looking forward to sitting on the hide.

Then we have the pursuit, and finally Rama kills the deer. At that very moment, Maricha adopts Rama’s voice and cries out in distress. Sita wants Lakshmana to be off at once to save Rama. And during the argument they have over that, you have this stereotypical statement about women’s nature:

This is the nature of women the whole world over: Women care nothing for righteousness, they are flighty, sharp-tongued and divisive.

For those of you who thought that the figure of Khema is sort of a flimsy woman, we need to look at it in a certain context. You have these general notions about women which are very much part of the prevalent oral, textual tradition. When we compare that to the representation of Khema, we can probably notice certain differences. She may not come across to us as a twenty-first century woman in Kolkata, but she is doing something different from what Sita is doing, and that is an interesting point of comparison that you perhaps need to keep in mind.
Back in the story, Ravana duly arrives. He is in disguise and he asks Sita to abandon the life in the forest and go settle for a life in a palace instead. Sita decides to be hospitable to him partly out of fear because he seems to be a Brahman and a guest, and she is anxious he not curse them. So, you have this anxiety—it is not a hospitality that is extended spontaneously but a cautious kind. What Sita does is to introduce herself to Ravana in terms of her father and her husband—it is interesting to compare that to when Shurpanakha introduces herself in terms of her brothers. Here, there is no mention of brothers, obviously it is a different kind of kinship network. Then, she describes how they came into the forest, describing Rama in glowing terms as somebody who gives and does not receive and therefore superior, who tells the truth and does not lie. At this point, Ravana reveals his true identity. Sita, in spite of that, turns down his overtures and declares her loyalty to Rama. There is a series of comparisons that she makes: Ravana is like a jackal and Rama, a lion. Again, the power hierarchy of the animal imagery is very clear and this is something that all of us relate to fairly easily. Ravana also mentions his lineage, says he is the brother of Kubera, the god of wealth, and then he assumes his true form and carries her away. This is a narrative where the king emerges as the martial figure who can be potentially violent, where you have a sharply demarcated gender relationship, and where the king’s dharma seems to lie in the victories he scores over the Rakshasas. If the Rakshasas represent the others—those who are outside the varna–jati hierarchy, then this is a narrative of conflict to the finish. It is a conflict which ends ultimately in the extermination of the Rakshasas.

Coming to the Rohantamiga Jataka. Many of you are probably aware that there are more than 500 Jatakas, and the longer ones tend to be towards the end of the
collection. This is one of the longer Jatakas with verses and prose as usual, and one can think of the ways in which this could have been used in a situation of performance, narrative etc., how part of it could have been sung, part of it could have been enacted—there could have been different ways of transmitting the same narrative. Like Maricha, although he is not described as vividly, Rohanta is a golden deer whose parents are dependent on him. It is interesting that whereas Dasharatha and Rama are separated from each other, Rohanta has a close bond with his parents. Then, you have Queen Khema who, in a dream, sees Rohanta sitting and preaching the dhamma. As she wakes up, the deer flees. She wants the deer and asks her maids to catch it. She soon realizes that her maids will not take her seriously and nor will her husband if she says that she dreamt of a golden deer. So what she does instead is to say that it is a craving she is experiencing as a pregnant woman—there is an element of deceit here. What is interesting is that the knowledge of the golden deer is not found in the king’s court—it is the Nishada—the hunter living on the outskirts of the settlement—who has knowledge of it. The hunter’s father, on his death bed, had imparted this knowledge to his son, so his son is the only person who knows where the golden deer is.

It is again interesting that knowledge is no longer confined within the Brahmanical system. It is the real or true knowledge which will make a difference and that lies with the hunter who mediates between the forest and the court, leading to a transformation of the court, as it were. Now, when the Nishada goes into the forest, he discovers the habits of the deer and then sets up a trap near a pond where he knows the deer will come to drink water. The Bodhisatta comes to drink
water and realizes that he is trapped; but he pretends to
drink water till the whole herd has had their fill of
water. Only after that does he let out a cry which alerts
the rest of the looming danger. Thus, here we have a
different notion of kinship being projected, a more
paternalistic, more benevolent notion. Not democratic,
yet more open-ended. And very unlike the kind of
tense situation we have among Rama, Lakshmana and
Sita. We also read the interesting description of how
both the brother and sister, Chitta and Sutana, run away
with the rest of the herd. But when they realize their
brother is not with them, they come back. A different
scenario from the Rama–Lakshmana–Sita one, where
you have angry exchanges and so on. Here, the siblings
come back on their own.

As an aside, I would like to draw your attention to
the Dasharatha Jataka where Rama, Lakshmana and Sita
are represented as brothers and sister. Again, we find a
symbolic parallel. It is supposed to be a supportive rela-
tionship. So you do have an alternative vision of kinship
here. Both kinship and kingship are defined in some-
what different ways.

Then, you have the transformation of the hunter.
The hunter becomes a different person altogether. He
realizes there is something unique about these two
animals standing guard around the one who is trapped.
It is a situation he has not encountered before and, for
those of us who have some kind of hope for non-vio-
ience and peace, this is an extremely beautiful image.
One animal is trapped, two others stand quietly by its
side and this leads to a change of heart on the part of
the hunter. And because it leads to a change of heart,
the hunter decides to release the deer and to heal it.
And the description is really graphic—about how he
joins bone to bone, skin to skin, muscle to muscle and
then the Bodhisatta wants to know why he has come to the forest in the first place and realizes he has a mission. He says he is willing to go with the hunter, but the hunter says that kings are cruel, they are not to be trusted. As proof that they have met, the hunter strokes the back of the deer; his palms are covered with golden hair, with which he then returns to the court. There is an initial interrogation, after which he is duly honoured, and then he preaches the dhamma to Khema and her husband. This dhamma may not seem very new to us, but that may also be because it has very strong parallels with the Ashokan notion of dhamma. It includes respect for parents, wife, children, friends, ministers, engaging in the dhamma yuddha and dhamma yatra, the kinds of pilgrimages and tours of dhamma mentioned by Ashoka who advocates looking after the praja or his subjects, looking after both Brahmans and Shramans, and all creatures. It is an alternative vision of kingship and one we conventionally associate with Ashoka—on the basis of the Ashoka inscriptions—and it seems to come alive here.

The king offers various kinds of rewards—coins, ornaments, even wives—so he would have probably ended up with three wives! Whether that would be a good or a bad situation, or a conflictual one, we don’t know. It is also suggested that he should adopt a different mode of livelihood. The livelihoods are described as those which are laid down in the Brahmanical texts for the Vaishyas—agriculture, trade, money-lending. These are what the king recommends but the Nishada refuses. Instead, he says, he will renounce the world, leaving all the wealth for his wife and children.

Jataka stories have something known as the samodhana—many of you may be familiar with this—where
parallels are drawn between characters of the present and characters of the past. Now, not surprisingly, the Buddha is identified as Rohanta—he is the Bodhisatta. That is the first equation. His sister Sutana is identified with Uppalavanna, a very famous bhikkhuni in the Buddhist tradition. His brother Chitta is identified with Ananda—one of his very dear disciples. Khema, we are told is an unnamed bhikkhuni in the present birth, so we do not have a name for her. The king is identified with Sariputta, another famous disciple of the Buddha. The Nishada is identified with Channa, an attendant who accompanies the Buddha-to-be when he leaves the palace on his quest for enlightenment.

Does this text offer us an alternative view of gender relations? I am not saying that these are equitable gender relations, but do they seem to be different from what we have in Valmiki’s Ramayana? Does it also give us a different sense of women’s desires? Shurpanakha has one kind of desire, Sita has another, Khema has yet another. So, you have a range of women’s desires being discussed in these narratives—what do we make of that? Would kingship be automatically militaristic? What is the difference between a militaristic king and a paternalistic king? You have a range of possibilities within the framework of monarchy that is being opened up and explored in different ways. And then, as I mentioned earlier, one of the very fascinating things about the Rohantamiga Jataka is the centrality of the Nishada in imparting knowledge. He is the one who mediates between the forest and the settled lands, and that such a key role is being assigned to the Nishada rather than to a pandit or a scholar is really significant. It allows us for an alternative vision and a way of looking at the relationship. What is also interesting is that, in the Rohantamiga Jataka, the wisdom to govern the
kingdom comes from a deer. The deer, apart from the golden deer we have been talking about, is otherwise a fascinating animal because it is one of the herbivores which cannot be domesticated. It has resisted domestication, in a certain sense. Why the deer as a symbol eventually becomes important as a mediating figure is something that we might need to think about, talk about and try to understand.

These narratives, the Ramayana and the Rohan-tamiga Jataka, were co-circulating, were co-existing. It is important to think what these alternative visions were and how people would have responded to them. It allows for a certain space for thinking, a certain creative way of engaging with a different mode of communication. What I find fascinating about this story is also that it seems to use the imagery of the Ramayana to tell a very different story, and somewhere, I think, there is perhaps a message for us in terms of the strategies of communications that we use. Very often, we tend to use strategies that are reactive—and I am not saying they are not necessary, they very often are—but can we think of other creative ways of responding to situations of conflict that create space for a different kind of engagement?

Note
All translations of the Ramayana are from Sheldon I. Pollock, The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India (New Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 2007).
Excerpt 1 is from sarga 16, verses 8–11 (p. 123).
Excerpt 2 is from sarga 40, verses 13–16 (p.170).
Excerpt 3 is from sarga 43, verse 27 (p.178).
Question-and-Answer Session

Audience Member 1. I want to ask you about this line in the Rohantamiga Jataka where the Nishada is being asked why he would not adopt one of the better professions—agriculture, trade or banking? I thought that is significant in the sense that it shows the rise of the Vaishyas and the possibility of social mobility—that the Nishada can move up the so-called social ladder by adopting a better profession.

Roy. Actually, I think what is interesting is that the Nishada refuses this and then goes on to adopt an independent position. He is refusing what the king has to offer, so he is opting out of the courtly social order that he is, in a sense, helping to set up. And I think that is a very interesting statement, because he is then helping the king, but he does not want to get into any kind of obligation from the king. I think when we talk about social hierarchy, sometimes it is useful to remove ourselves from where we are located and see how our world would look from the outside. From the Nishada’s point of view, agriculture, trading or money lending may not seem to be particularly attractive propositions. We automatically assume that these are what people want. There may be others who have different aspirations. This text allows us for that space to think about people who have alternative aspirations which may not correspond with what we would ‘normally expect’.

Audience Member 2. When you talk of gender equations in the Ramayana and the Jatakas, the dynamism is always very relative. How do we standardize it? Can it be anything? What is your take on that?

Roy. I don’t think we need to standardize. What we need to do is contextualize, and see what we have in terms
of gender relations in these two texts which would have been more or less contemporary in their circulation. Some people would have heard both, some people would have heard only one, but they would have different ideas to think through. What is interesting for me is to imagine their implications if and how they could circulate simultaneously. People would have that mental space to think through these alternative possibilities. Today, we might think of other possibilities as well. In the Ramayana story, as we know, Kaikeyi has this desire for power. That is the starting point of the exile narrative. Then Sita has this desire for the golden deer—that again leads to further complications. So, you can see that the female desire plays a part, apart from Shurpanakha’s. Shurpanakha, I am leaving aside for the moment. Even these women who are located within the framework of the narrative in Ayodhya, you can see that there are ways in which their desires are de-legitimized. They are asking for something that only means trouble. Whereas in the case of Khema, her desire is something that does not lead to trouble. Rather, it results in the enlightenment of the king. So there are different ways in which the notion of female desire is played out in the two narratives.

Biswajit Goswami. I am a student of literature at Maulana Azad College. In the text, the hunter describes the deer to the king as having a back as white as silver—as you have written in your text. You have also mentioned that the hunter, when he describes the king to Rohanta, says that the king cannot be trusted. In Christian mythology, we see that the colour silver is a symbol of treachery and betrayal. So, the deer has the colour silver. I think it is as if you know he already knows about the nature of the king. So, can there be a bridge between Christian mythology and the Rohantamiga Jataka?
Roy. I am sure there are a lot of interactions taking place. But, remember: in the narrative, when the hunter strokes Rohanta’s back, what he gets on the palm of his hands is golden hair. Maricha is described as a jewelled deer, with all kinds of precious stones all over his body, his tail like a rainbow and so on (of course, these are literary devices). When the deer is described, it also has this combination of gold and silver. What is striking, of course, is the deer that Khema sees in her dream—it is described as golden, and the hair that the hunter carries back as proof that he has actually met the deer is also described as golden. It is quite likely that there is some amount of interaction that could have led to an exchange of imagery between different traditions.

Audience Member 3. I was wondering why, when we talk about Sita’s desire, we think of her as an oppressed person. Is there something in the metaphor of the jackal and the lion that she is using that refers to what she likes, what kind of desire she expects her man to fulfil? Also, are there any versions of the Ramayana where Sita is asking Rama if he had any romantic liaison with anyone when she was away. That is not something that we hear about ever!

Roy. I wouldn’t even venture to comment on the different ‘tellings’, as Ramanujan would have called them, of the Ramayana because there are just so many that I don’t even want to enter into any kind of ‘yes’ or ‘no’ statement about that. But, in this particular section, what is interesting is, both in the Sanskrit and in the Pali/Prakrit tradition, when the jackal and the lion are introduced, usually the jackal triumphs—as in the Panchatantra narratives—because it is smarter than the lion. But you can also see that there is a hierarchy of power that is represented over there. When the jackal
triumphs, it is the weak triumphing over the strong. But when these animals are used as metaphors by Sita, and it is a long section (sarga 45, verses 29 to 43), it is more to suggest that she and Rama are of a higher status than Ravana, and Ravana is just going beyond his position in even dreaming that he can own her or take her, so to speak. In her glorification of Rama, it is more her assertion of her husband’s power than her desire in this case.

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Can history contribute to peace? is part of the bigger question: Can education contribute to peace? The record is not particularly clear. Some of the most brutal experiences of the twentieth century originated from highly educated countries of the world. If you look at South Asia: the first country to expand its education system and make it universal became the site of the worst civil strife. I am, of course, referring to Sri Lanka. And if you look at the world at large, the most aggressive country in the world, which does not mind intervening anywhere with messages of democracy and bombs to back them, is widely believed to have the world’s most advanced system of modern education. So, education, in a generic sense, does not necessarily promise peace. A number of philosophers have guided us into recognizing the distinction between education as an idea and a system. The idea or concept of education is full of promise for humanity, but this concept must wait for historical circumstances to manifest in a system. And to look for that idea in a historical vacuum is somewhat silly. Jiddu Krishnamurti, Bertrand Russell Maria Montessori—there is a whole chain of peace thinkers in the twentieth century to whom one can go to seek some clarity about this larger
question in which I am placing this more limited question, which is the title of this talk today—Can history contribute to peace?

Obviously, when I ask this question, I mean the history in education or the history which people learn through schools and colleges. Can that history contribute to peace? That is the provocative, stimulating and promising question we will engage with before returning to this broader question. Our education in history begins during childhood and has long-term consequences. Indeed, all experiences of childhood have long-term consequences for individual human life as well as the collective life of a society, nation, humanity and so on. Therefore, it is important to ask: What does history impart to children? What does it impart to youth? As we ponder over these questions, we should also situate ourselves in the modern world, a world which is somewhat unique compared to any previous time in history. In this world, the modern idea of education is an idea that not only promises but also has nearly fulfilled universality. It is only in our present-day world that we carry this expectation that education will, as a system, expand so much that it will include everyone. The idea of an inclusive and fully universalized education system is really an idea of a certain kind of unprecedented value. We don’t quite know what it means—how it will affect knowledge, whether it will create commonalities of knowledge that permeate individual understandings. Or will education serve as a vast machinery of the regimentation of the mind which will insist on certain common parameters? In no part of the world does the history of education answer these questions for us.

The experience of expanded education systems is very new, even more so in South Asia. In India, it is so new that we are still fighting it—the right to education is subject to so many court cases, and the Right to Education Act has
already been amended twice. India’s discomfort with this idea is quite apparent. The only country which has some experience of this idea is Sri Lanka, and even it has not quite been able to cope with the consequences of a universalized education system at the elementary level. So we are looking at uncharted territory. And a particularly complex territory because, under the regime of modernity, education expands under the auspices of the state. It is the state which takes charge. Because of which, processes of acculturation or socialization become extremely complex. The term socialization has a very special meaning in educational theory. The classic book by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, reminds us that socialization is no unitary process, nor is it something that happens in the same fashion throughout childhood. They have broadly divided it into (i) an emotionally intense period of ‘primary socialization’, and (ii) the subsequent period where the school comes in—secondary socialization. Primary socialization, the basis of numerous studies in fields of psychology and social anthropology, covers the first three to four years of life—the crucial years during which the child gets imprinted with a number of essential beliefs, attitudes and anchors of the mind. The child is not in a position to question, and is situated within the family, at home. A central debate in educational theory remains: Can secondary socialization make an impact on primary socialization? Can schools teach to question what has been learnt and internalized before the school-going age? The question remains unanswered by research and is worthy of introspection. It is an important question especially for history, because history, as a discipline, does not quite acknowledge how children learn.

The historical development of cognitive psychology through the twentieth century has not quite made its mark
on the teaching of history. Philosopher John Dewey remained quite unclear whether history should be taught at all to children and at what age. The best he conceded was in one of his earlier books that perhaps we can introduce history—or a bit of history, essentially as a kind of sociology—by age 14 or 16. The learning of history requires a more mature mind, and Dewey’s work preceded that of [Jean] Piaget and [Lev] Vygotsky. What is a mature mind? A formally thinking mind, a logical or mathematically equipped mind which is able to reflect on itself. When Dewey was writing, all these ideas were way ahead in the history of psychology and its growth. The age he recommended, i.e. 16 years, seems to be the point at which one might expect some degree of normative achievement of some of the skills required for an engagement with history. We can ask: How does time sense develop in children? Well, it develops more slowly than the sense of space and perspective and so on. Therefore, when one looks at, let us say, Class 4 in Maharashtra as the time to learn about Shivaji as a historical hero in a textbook—the reason it comes at Class 4, before any social science has been introduced, one wonders what it really achieves at that point. Or, even in class 6, when ancient India is introduced—one wonders where the children’s time sense is at this point. Are they able to engage with their parents’ lives by then? Can they really imagine time that long ago so as to be able to engage with these issues?

With the help of archaeology, history in Class 6 becomes perhaps a bit more palpable. Where contemporary sense-making begins is actually after the historian has completed his or her continuous compulsive song which must start with the ancient and come to the modern. And it comes only in Class 8. History as a discipline is organized with its own academic rationalism, its own history and it
leaves very little room for the school-curriculum designer or teachers. Now, having said all these things, I wish to come to the most difficult element of early socialization and cognitive development in children, and that has to do with the development of self-identity. Self-identity is a very paradoxical concept because there is an individual self and there is also a collective self. Primary socialization already sows the roots of collective socialization with those compulsory forms of identity which one recognizes after a few more years—that I cannot change my caste or my religion easily and I am, before I know who I am (which I will know around adolescence or after it), already a Hindu or a Muslim, I am already a Kshatriya or a Brahman and so on and so forth. Primary socialization leaves very little room for the non-acceptance of a collective identity. The school builds on it and then offers a slightly wider collective identity—wider than caste, religion, language—the national identity. That is the school’s essential project under the modern state: to sow the seeds of citizenship. Social sciences are used quite consciously in all countries of the world to create loyal citizenship—citizens who are aware of and are proud of the nation.

Educational debates around this subject are extremely useful, interesting and difficult and we will return to some of them. About 20 years ago, I became acutely conscious of this issue of a collective identity imparted by the schools. I had an almost epiphanic moment when I crossed the Wagah Border by bus. It was 1999. I had spent a year already with history textbooks of India and Pakistan. From both these countries, I had chosen a reasonable sample which I thought would be valid, which I thought represented their diversity, and I felt I was quite aware of the broad differences by then. I was going to meet children in Pakistan, their teachers and some historians and I thought I would do the
same thing on this side of the border when I came back. But, when our bus—after elaborate checks—crossed the border, I suddenly noticed a small group of boys playing cricket on the right side of the road that was going to lead to Lahore in less than an hour. And it struck me that these boys have, in their mind, a different construction of the past from what I carry from my childhood, or even the boys that I now know in Delhi have. The sight of those boys playing cricket prompted me into thinking about what they might or might not know about something that I already knew. And I suddenly felt a serious inadequacy or unpreparedness on my part for this project. I felt I should have chosen the anthropological mode rather than an educational theory mode, because we were looking at nothing less than a different culture. As Indians, we probably feel it is similar. We like to emphasize the similarities of culture, having suffered together through Partition. But I felt I was in a foreign country and I must know how those boys thought and that I must start from scratch: But where was scratch? Was it 1947? Was it 1971? Where were we then in 1999?

That experience made me both curious and humble, as though I were an explorer of a new territory of the mind. Ultimately, I wrote two books on this subject: the first was published in 2001, titled *Prejudice and Pride: School Histories of the Freedom Struggles of India and Pakistan*, because both sides of the border share prejudice as well as pride. Six years later, I felt again that I had not done a good enough job of putting together all that I wanted to say, so I wrote another book called *Battle for Peace* (2007). In the first book, my attempt had been to assemble an analytical narrative of the Indian historian which finds different manifestations in different kinds of textbooks. A similar attempt was made on the Pakistani side. I had made several—you might say—
methodological choices in order to be able to cut through the various layers of internal differences, and differences across—to be able to arrive at a discourse—an analysis of how this remarkable mutual hostility can be read into what children read. Now, this sentence, of course, is very unnuanced because there is no such uniform thing as 'the child' or 'children'—there are different children. Who is reading which textbook, which teachers are teaching them, what kind of school and where—all of these are terribly important questions (and we will return to them in a moment), because the textbook itself is simply an artefact. If you find it in a national museum, you ought to look at it in a way that will acknowledge its own history or the compulsion of circumstances under which it was written. Or, whether it was written by a single author or several authors and so on. These are all very intriguing questions—where is it going to be used and how is it going to be used? My attempt was to find, through my analysis, what I call 'master narratives' of India and Pakistan.

And I also wanted to pick up what I call ‘memory posters’ with which the past is held in the mind as a visual, during childhood or early youth. With the help of these two major devices, I looked at the 90-year period from 1857 to 1947. It goes without saying that both master narratives are hurtling towards freedom, which was also Partition. So, they are teleological, of course. But, interestingly enough, between 1857 and roughly 1929, they remain almost reconcilable narratives, and you can even see the similar names among the people who inhabit those narratives. Sometimes you feel quite pleased to see that this part of the past was not as divided and not as mutually incompatible as one might think. But when you hit 1930, and the last 17 years to freedom and Partition, you recognize how the narrative picks up pace and becomes irreconcilably
divergent. Now it is no longer possible to see parallels—now, there are two different directions in which the narratives move. One towards a sense of celebration of freedom from colonial rule as well as remorse and sadness for the tragedy of Partition; the other towards the happiness of having separated and, much less importantly, arriving at freedom through that separation. These two emotions are very difficult to convey. In the course of my research, I met many Pakistani teachers, students in their early teens—particularly several girls at Lahore Grammar School—and those encounters left with me very poignant memories about how they approached the subject. Quite often, I think about the things they said: ‘Why we left you in 1947’ and ‘Why, 70 years later, we still have little evidence that it was worth it.’ This feeling is articulated repeatedly—sometimes as a subtext, sometimes as an articulation—but it is a very strong feeling.

When you go deeper into the subtext and apply more advanced techniques of finding meaning, the Pakistani history narrative can be summarized thus: ‘This is why we left’. It is a narrative of justification. That justification includes a sense of guilt and yet a sense that this much guilt is worth harbouring, but ‘Let’s not feel too guilty because the cause was worth it!’ The Indian narrative, on the other hand, is not a ‘why’ narrative but a ‘how’ and a ‘who’ narrative. How did we lose the project and who was responsible for it? That is how the Indian narrative manages across the last three years from 1944 to 1947, by focusing repeatedly on: How did things go that wrong? Yes, freedom was won, but how did Partition occur?

So, we end up with these phenomena of two projects of socializing the young. One is, of course, a secular agenda of socialization into the modern Indian identity. The idea of India as a country that respects its diversity. From this
narrative’s perspective, the ‘other’ was, and is, not secular and we feel very sorely about that. That the ‘other’ is deeply religious and, in the parlance accepted in the history academia and generally in the academia in English, communal (in Hindi, saampradaayik), renders Pakistan and its creation an illegitimate result of the nationalist struggle. And if Pakistan hardens further, as it did after 1971, when its nation-building project and its identity agenda moved westwards as Aijaz Ahmad has pointed out, then the two become even more incompatible—Pakistan wanting now to be fully recognized as an Islamic state and socializing its children through what is no more history but Pakistan Studies. It is the enfeebled and divided Pakistan of 1971 which paved the way for this new incompatibility with the Indian project of socialization of children into believing that we are morally more accommodative and therefore somewhat justifiably claiming superiority as a modern nation compared to our neighbour whose nation-building project was communal to begin with and became even more so after 1971. From the Pakistani side, the incompatibility is no less with the Indian project because Pakistan’s agenda of socializing its young is imprinted with the idea that what India believes about itself is a myth and therefore it need not be taken too seriously; that India is hypocritical; that India would like to project to the world a secular identity but, sooner or later, the truth will out. This ominous message continues to reverberate across South Asia and is currently reverberating evermore loudly as we wait for 2019.

This problem between the two nations is not played out only in history classrooms. By the way, Partition and freedom are the last chapters of history taught in schools. History stops at 1947—political science takes care of the rest, but we do not go beyond that. This neighbourly
hostility is a defining influence on the ethos of our schools, classrooms, media, especially cinema, television, parliament, its televised versions and so on. The noise of life surrounds education. This noise includes great actors who can excel in love, friendship as well as terrible, bloody enmity, great plots, memories of wars—and there are plenty. There are big wars, smaller wars and experimental wars that we have had with Pakistan and, therefore, militaristic memory-building is constantly going on around the project of ‘educating everyone’ through a universalized system of education. So, education does not operate in isolation and this cliché, that education is part of this larger reality, often makes us forget that education is a major part of modern nation-building. This idea of a universalized system aimed at citizenship education is an idea that has to be looked beyond things like what is in the curriculum or the textbook, or how it is being taught, etc. All these questions of ‘quality’ have to be situated in the ethos within which schools function. And, when I say schools, I mean all schools, including private ones.

**Regimentation**

Schooling as a process, schools as a modern institution—how do they function? Numerous studies in the world and in India will tell you that schools are able to function with the help of regimentation. Regimentation of the child’s body and mind and heart are essential devices through which the project of education reaches its goals. How does regimentation happen? We are aware of this word ‘regimentation’ because of its application in military, police and so on, but regimentation in schools is actually no less interesting and compelling. Compliance, as a general rule, is something that every child must learn by the time the nursery years are over. It also means compliance of the body, which the French sociologist [Pierre] Bourdieu put under
'habitus’—a certain kind of culture which includes the body, thoughts, behaviour, an enveloping culture the child must take on and internalize in order to become a successful pupil. It is an essential condition for any school education to work, and, if you are a schoolteacher, you know how important it is to make a group of 30 or 40 children work together.

I realize that you need certain kinds of habitus creation, especially when the classroom is diverse. I make these points without the urge to criticize and purely with the desire to analyse. So, the higher you go in the hierarchy of schools, you find that they distinguish themselves in terms of their effectiveness and quality by using another word—almost a cousin of regimentation—‘discipline’. The higher the school is in terms of its status in the market, the greater its dependence will be on its capacity to say that its children are disciplined, that they can be relied on to behave in certain ways. By the time they finish school, the stamp of the school will be so deeply imprinted, the students will carry it through the rest of their life and they will remember ‘I am from such-and-such school!’ They will even be able to spot another person in a crowd without having to ask which school they are from! This is what Bourdieu described as habitus—that we notice institutional memories manifested in our bodies and not just in our language (which all great institutions claim they can shape). In addition to this idea of compliance and discipline, another important regimenting device that is often ignored—you might use the word ‘elite’ here to refer to these schools because they use it more successfully and more purposefully—is the ability to give an answer quickly. Unthinking quickness is an aspect of the regimentation that the so-called good schools actually inculcate. It is a positive kind of regimentation you might say, because it assists the child in becoming increasingly competitive—you only need to
sit in a Class 9 classroom at any of the famous schools of Calcutta or Delhi. The teacher is sometimes not able to finish the question and the hands have already gone up. This unthinking quickness and the desire to be given a chance before anyone else is a consequence of long-standing socialization value which does not quite match the expectation of critical enquiry which requires reflection, requires taking a few seconds or minutes before you answer a question. That is something that this regimentation cannot create. Answers are given on the assumption that the question does not require thought—it only requires recall and, therefore, is a preparation of the fourth great source of regimentation: fear. Fear of the examination where so much has to be recalled under great pressure, that preparation, right from nursery to the next 13–14 years, may prove inadequate.

Therefore, you live in perpetual fear and you follow the beaten path of how to approach an examination. Drill, coaching, all of these are accessories of good regimentation in schools. And the higher you go in the hierarchy of grades, the more you approach those accessories as supplements to your learning at school. This broader picture, the history teacher has to keep in mind. History, when we look at history as a means of socializing the mind into critical enquiry as we would ideally like, as Professor Nair pointed out yesterday, must take place in this ethos which has so many diverse and powerful devices of regimentation. While doing my Indo–Pak research, I was acutely aware of some of these aspects of school life and was able to ask history teachers to some extent, both in Pakistan and in India, how they cope with these various aspects of school life. Most of them acknowledged that they really had no control over them. In fact, in the earlier classes (6, 7 and 8), quite often the history teacher is not somebody who is necessarily from the field of history. It is only after Class 9 and sometimes after Class 11 that history becomes an optional subject, that you
can guarantee that the child will be taught by somebody who has studied history. Therefore, the question, whether teaching of history by itself can create reflexivity or openness of mind in an ethos otherwise driven towards regimentation, is a question that needs to be pondered on with a considerable awareness of the difficulties involved.

The other major aspect that history deals with, in its contribution to nation-building, is participation in a national narrative. In the modern world, all history narratives are essentially, at the school level, national narratives. As many presentations have pointed out, these are the narratives of how things unfolded in the territory of the nation. The nation-building project needs to be encountered without excessive sensitivity. I say that because, at present, the nationalist project has been hijacked, vitiated by the political circumstances under which we, as Indians, are suffering. It was being vitiated in any case in Pakistan 70 years ago. So what can we do without it? Can nation-building be devoid of political nationalism or engage with political nationalism in creative ways? Can we engage in Rabindranath Tagore’s dream of being Indians without being nationalists? Is it possible?

All these questions bring us to the present, where we worry about school textbooks and put on a pedestal what the NCERT has done. The very first word of the acronym NCERT is ‘national’. When we look at these new textbooks created in 2006, 2007 and 2008 for all levels, for different subjects including history, we tend to feel quite happy. Especially those of us engaging with English-medium schools—we are people who are a part of a national elite of sorts—we like to think that we have done a good job. I feel especially happy because I was in the NCERT during those fortuitous years. The story of these textbooks makes us think ‘Yes, we can!’
Now, as we proceed in this section of the talk where I want to bring in those broader questions, questions of peace, of education, can education bring peace in the world and so on, I want to dwell on a particular story. Both India and Pakistan—I learnt during my project and subsequently from other experiences—are enormously diverse countries. India’s diversity is something we cannot not quite capture in a museum. The National Crafts Museum, a small museum near Pragati Maidan in Delhi, displays from time to time how diverse we are, unlike the National Museum. You will have to visit state museums like the Bihar Museum in Patna or the museum in Tamil Nadu or elsewhere to be reminded and told how diverse we are. In Pakistan now, there is a museum called Lok Virsa Museum, a creation of enormous financial investment. About 20 kilometres from Islamabad, it is dedicated to the women of Pakistan. As you enter the first gallery, you encounter the Vedas, the Buddha and various other layers of identity that the museum claims Pakistan has inherited. Then you go through the various galleries of this remarkable museum (which takes almost a whole day) to recognize and celebrate the extent to which Pakistan has gone to greet its internal diversity.

If both countries are indeed so diverse, then how we look at their textbooks becomes an even more important issue. Both countries are hierarchically organized in terms of their societies. If one thing can be said about India and Pakistan that is absolutely undebatable, it is that they are highly unequal societies. This inequality is expressed in the way their education systems work. The NCERT produces what I would call trans-provincial textbooks. The trans-provincial domain in India is of about roughly 10 per cent of schools now. Before the National Curriculum Framework 2005 was composed, this trans-provincial India consisted of about 3.5 per cent of schools; now the
percentage has gone up. We seldom recognize that the 10 per cent of schools we are referring to are mostly the private schools—they are CBSE schools, approximately 20,000 of them all over India, including 3,000 in Delhi. But once you have left out Delhi, you will notice that CBSE covers a very limited sphere of India’s secondary education system. An overwhelming majority of Indians go to provincial schools, schools that cater mostly to the lower strata of Indian society. That is where education becomes mass education. Where CBSE uses NCERT textbooks, which are available in English (and in Hindi and Urdu), this trans-provincial India blocks us from recognizing the problem of provincial India. When people praise these books, I request them to think about what they are saying. Once the secretary of the Secondary Education Board of West Bengal asked me for some guidance about history, education and history textbooks, and I said: ‘Our best person is with you.’ But he had not heard of the person I was referring to. So we sent names like Kunal Chakrabarti to Calcutta, Janaki Nair to Karnataka and so on, and requested state governments to utilize the resources of their own states to improve their books.

The chairperson of the Social Sciences syllabus committee, Professor Hari Vasudevan, was until recently a professor of history in Calcutta. Very recently, when the present government of West Bengal was about to start creating new books, Professor Vasudevan spent a few hours with the committee in charge of this exercise. He explained exactly what the NCERT was trying to do. This notion of multi-vocality or inclusion, the idea of letting multiple sources speak to children, letting children understand how historians work, paradoxes, place for ambiguity, multiple perspectives—he explained all of that in great detail using examples. At the end of it, senior members of the committee said they
appreciated the work but that ‘this won’t do in Bengal’. ‘We feel that children need a simple narrative of what happened, and this kind of idea may not work for us, for our teachers, our schools’—was their main argument, among various apologetic reasons justifying the old kind of textbooks now being produced under a new government in Bengal.

Currently, a similar exercise is on in Tamil Nadu. The NCERT, of course, still sends experts to many occasions, but NCERT books do not really impress nor have impressed any major publisher in India. It is certainly not ICSE—the ICSE school system does not seem to have bothered to look at either the curriculum or the syllabus on which NCERT books are based. When people look at these textbooks, they feel very happy, a bit proud—they feel that they have really grown on some exotic tree! But they fail to recognize what financial and academic investment was made to create them. Why was it possible to do so during UPA 1? Can anybody else do it in Pakistan or Sri Lanka or anywhere with the books that we sometimes belittle, almost make fun of? These are very deep questions. How did we manage this exercise, which in a sense dilutes the regimenting agenda of the schools, makes history come alive and creates the possibility of critical enquiry, how did we make it the hallmark of history teaching? Let us recall the history of history textbook making in NCERT. It was in 1967 that Professor Romila Thapar wrote the Class 6 and 7 textbooks of history. These were the first textbooks of a new kind—if you look at her opening chapter, you will be struck by its imagination. In fact, that opening chapter could be reproduced today in one of these 2006, 2007, 2008 books and it would look quite fitting because she spoke about the past as an archaeological find where you find a clay pitcher, not the whole pitcher but just a piece, and with its help, you had to piece together an idea of what that clay
pitcher might have looked like, who might have used it, what kind of society might have existed whose people were using it. She introduced the question of sources, used the idea of historical imagination and so on. In 1967! Had that book never been written, or, as a senior academic even at that time, had she not engaged with textbook development, the 2006 books would not have been possible.

These books became possible because we had been there and lived through a 30-year-old or a 40-year-old controversy over history books. We saw shifts in various parts of the country, but not necessarily because of a shift of government. This is a much more complex story than people would like to acknowledge. If we acknowledge that story and accept that we are lucky to have something which can be used for promoting critical enquiry, why is that not happening? We merely curse the teachers—they are the spoilsports, they don’t know how to use these books, we have done our job, but they can’t do theirs—‘Can’t they understand what it means to be imaginative?’ and so on.

We do not want to ask who becomes a teacher, under what circumstances does she work and, more importantly, who studies in these schools? Who studies the NCERT textbook and who studies the Uttar Pradesh state-board textbooks? Who studies the Gujarat state-board textbooks? It is the Gujarat textbook that should be compared to the Sri Lankan textbook (discussed earlier today), not the NCERT textbook. Otherwise, it is not a valid comparison. Pakistan’s federal curriculum wing, if you visit it, is smaller than this stage. One officer sits there. When I visited, there was a military officer in charge. He has no resources like NCERT, he has no academic access to any work. His job is to coordinate and send orders. Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh—in fact, no country in the world has what is truly a relic of the Nehruvian era, the National Council of
Educational Research and Training, modelled on the Central Pedagogiska Institute of Moscow. If it has acted somewhat democratically, then we must congratulate ourselves as a nation where we are in the nation-building project today. We cannot lose that narrative altogether just because we hate it, especially not now when when ‘nationalism’ and ‘nation-building’ have become tools of manipulation. Participatory democracy, which the National Curriculum Framework attempts to promote, consists of critical citizens and critical historians who do not criticize their South Asian neighbours because they are poorer. They cannot invest those resources and they do not know where to go. In fact, our own states do not know what to do about this subject.

Can history contribute to peace? Well, the answer is, of course, ‘Yes, it can!’ Can education contribute to peace? The answer will have to be, ‘Yes, it can!’ Both are very good ‘can’-s. But how do we turn that ‘can’ into reality? For that, we will have to answer the more crucial question of what we mean by ‘peace’. Without facing that question in the context of culture, we cannot really proceed very far, and this conference provides us with just the right opportunity to reflect on this question even if we do not find a final answer right now.

**HOW DOES EDUCATION WORK?**

Education is about creating a universe of discourse, about the use of words. And, if education succeeded, words alone would suffice for running societies, managing the world, dealing with dissent, hostility. Obviously, the educational project is complicated. The creation of a universe of discourse requires an understanding of education itself. If education has to work, it must work in real classrooms, under the guidance of ordinary teachers who are responsible for
every child. Then alone can we responsibly say, can we justifiably ask, whether education can contribute to peace. In an age of social media and rapid technological communication, these questions have become even more complicated. Can words be used so that, by the time they reach somebody, they are not distorted? Can my words remain intact? Can somebody who listens to or reads my words imagine what might have been meant by me before he or she imposes on them a meaning that arises from his or her own desire to relate to it? Which is, of course, the reader’s right, the listener’s right—to make sense of words in terms of his or her own life. The universe of discourse requires this kind of preparation, and schools have to be responsible for imparting that knowledge. Who else will do it except this ubiquitous institution which reaches out to all? Societies will have to work with the teacher who is there—the representative of the education project or education agenda, who will have to be trusted to deal with a syllabus. Textbooks are only as good as the syllabus is, and the syllabus is only as good as the curriculum. These are very sharply distinguished categories of educational theory which we sometimes ignore because we only look at the textbook. As I said to you earlier, a textbook is like an artefact. It does not reveal to you the architectural plan which the curriculum is, nor does it reveal to you the details of fittings which the syllabus is—fittings in a house that the architecture presents.

The textbook is really not all that important even though I know how difficult it is to create good books. People who engaged with this wonderful task during 2006–2008 and ended up with these prideworthy textbooks know how much of a strife it was, because textbooks as artefacts hide in them the enormous conflict through which they come into existence. And the 2006–2008 books
were no exception. The conflict then was not only with the BJP but also with the CPI(M). The best evidence which historians can pick up to understand this conflict between these wonderful textbooks and the CPI(M)’s intellectual class of that time is the special issue of the Trivandrum-based journal *Social Scientist*—that entire issue was devoted to critiquing the National Curriculum Framework. And what came out of it? It took about four years for the leftists or the left party to acknowledge that they had made a mistake. As usual with left parties, this mistake was never publicly acknowledged. On the other side, of course, the BJP wants to continue with the battle.

Yet, despite these conflicts, something has been achieved. The professional historians who assisted the NCERT and worked with it to create these books have achieved what had never been achieved before—some stability. The old, popular hypothesis that textbooks come and go depending on who is in power today stands nullified. Four years have passed since the present government has been at the Centre, and the textbooks still stand. People who say that they might go any day are obviously not reading newspapers. This government has only ten months left. If it wanted to withdraw these books, four years were long enough. There must be something about these books for many of them to have been picked up by states like Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand and other smaller states of India. But the bigger states like Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Gujarat, West Bengal—they have not been impressed. Deeper down in the social hierarchy, of course, you will find cruder textbooks (more crude than the Sri Lankan textbooks discussed today)—this I can promise you. I have been studying the Punjab state-board textbooks. Punjab textbooks, to this day, have not been influenced by the NCERT books, despite the NCERT’s special engagement with Punjab in a session in 2009. They
have not changed their perspective at all on Punjab’s own history, and, like Pakistan Studies is a subject there, Culture of Punjab is a subject here in Classes 9 and 10.

How West Bengal is doing is another interesting question. A historian in Calcutta has been studying Bangladesh and West Bengal textbooks in a kind of mutual analysis, and the outcomes show that Partition continues to remain a framing device for how we think about education today and what it must do. These are conditions which do not make critical enquiry as a goal of history-teaching particularly easy. But we must insist on this idea that there is a fundamental choice to be made about history. If history is to be seen in the context of peace, and if we wish to expect that history can contribute to peace, then the aim of teaching of history must be defined fairly clearly in favour of curiosity about the past, respect for what the past has left for us to look at—be it an artefact in a museum or a monument or a ruin. Because that is all that has been left. If we are not curious and respectful, we might lose it, it might get smashed by an army of hooligans. Therefore curiosity about the past can perhaps be the only major goal of teaching history if history is to serve the cause of peace. Can we look at the past as something that intrigues us? That makes us explorers in time? And can we use history to impart tools for this exploration, so that every child can participate in this excitement which the professional historian feels when he/she is able to piece together a jigsaw puzzle of something that happened long ago? If that kind of historical imagination is our goal, then we might be able to say that history can contribute to peace. And it can do so if the historian engages with the wider problems of school education. I find it sad that a major critical historian whose work we are very proud of—Professor Janaki Nair—says about the examination system, ‘We can’t do much’. No! I
think we have to. If not, our project cannot go very far. How can it be done, what can be done, etc., are issues to engage with. Recently, the system has gone back to compulsory grades and examinations, after eight years of keeping it voluntary, as the Right to Education Act and the National Curriculum Framework wanted. How did they do that despite our presence in our country? Why did we not resist it or how did we fail to resist it? These are the kinds of questions we will have to engage with if we want to tackle that fourth major source of regimentation—fear. Because, as my colleague Professor Kumkum Roy eloquently wrote in an article in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, the CBSE examination based on the NCERT textbooks does dampen some of their glory, and this is the twelfth year running of the conquest of the exam system by the glory of the new textbooks.

We cannot feel complacent just because the National Council and all these historians did a wonderful job. The idea that education can contribute to peace will obviously require much deeper engagement between the historians and everybody else responsible for education. Especially in the context of history itself, the historian will have to engage with psychologists, with social anthropologists and, more than anyone else, with history teachers, school principals and so on. This engagement really involves a bit of an additional activity in our system—the most meaningful activities in our system are known as extra-curricular activities!
QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION

Manoj Kumar Singh. I am from Azim Premji Foundation. You said that when your friends or colleagues engaged with the West Bengal board, the board said they needed textbooks that were easy for the child. Is an easy textbook really required for a child or is this something that is political? Whichever political party is in power wants something based on their choices.

Kumar. I do not think the present government can be so simplistically charged of that. I think from whatever I have heard from Professor Vasudevan, they share a general assumption, which runs across the system and society, that children cannot really engage with too much complexity. This is a common assumption—that we must simplify. Last year, at this conference, there was a presentation by the person responsible for Classes 6, 7 and 8. West Bengal has chosen to go the single-author path. The NCERT example is the example of multiple authors, multiple creators. And textbook writing has been replaced by textbook development by deliberation, by consultation. Much more time and resource is required for that kind of work, and, very often, state governments are in a considerable hurry to produce something quickly. All of these factors re-enforce the idea that our colleagues in West Bengal expressed by saying that it was interesting that we had been able to do it, that it was very good. They were even willing to read it—but they wanted to do something on the lines of the older textbooks. They genuinely believe that, as do many people in the private publishing world. Look at the ICSE board—so many years later, this board which is dependant on private publishers has not demanded that those books should benefit from what the NCERT books have achieved.
Audience Member 1. Right in the beginning you said that we should be sure of what peace is. So, what is your definition of peace?

Kumar. I tried to convey it but obviously I did not succeed! I think, in the context of education, peace probably means understanding. Understanding where the ‘other’ is coming from, the ‘other’ who is different from us—whether that us is in our neighbourhood or right here—understanding the ‘other’ with empathy, imagination, compassion. These are the ingredients of the kind of educated imagination one would like reformed schools to be able to create. Educated imagination is probably the best possible way to talk about peace. Peace means giving priority to words as means of engaging with conflict or resolving conflict or living with conflict—all of these. If words make it possible, then that is probably a good enough definition of peace we can live with in the context of formal education.

Audience Member 2. I would say that after a very long time we are coming across a proper definition of how history can be developed through peace. But I face a lot of questions in my classroom. I teach at Shrish Academy and when I teach Classes 10, 11 and 12, I always stumble across their preconceived notions and knowledge—of hatred, of taboo—notions adopted in their homes. It is very difficult to change that and customize them into peace. How can we do so? It is like they are imprinted with that hatred against a particular leader or person. So when they come to the classrooms, they are already biased about those particular instances or people. Especially the Indian national movement—it is a very controversial topic. We are all pointing fingers at the leaders. When we are teaching Indian national movement, there is no context of
peace—let’s be very honest about it. Peace is very far behind. We have Indian national movement as the last chapter not only for Class 10 but also for Classes 8, 9 and 10. They learn about violence, they learn about fascism, they learn about Nazism, they learn about all kinds of violence in the world and the by-products of those revolutions. So sometimes, it becomes very difficult for a history teacher to teach them what peace is. So, my question to you, sir, is: How can we teach these and also the idea that peace is necessary? How can we do both together?

Kumar. You have asked two questions and I would like to deal with them one by one. How do we challenge the knowledge that children bring to school? And you use the word—‘change’—it? That is where educational theory will remind you that you actually cannot change what has been internalized in primary socialization. Your best hope is that you can make the child reflect on what she or he has internalized. You make the child capable of introspection so that the child will wonder: ‘That hatred that I have picked up from home, or that distance that I am supposed to maintain from the Dalit, or the hatred of a Muslim or whoever, or fear of the foreigner, is it good to carry on with it or can I live with it without being overwhelmed by it?’ Critical thinking means being able to reflect on that in the context of one’s own life. And that is perhaps the greatest achievement that a teacher can aspire for—making a child think rather than persuade the child to ‘change’ his or her opinion directly. That does not happen—primary socialization runs too deep and attitudes form and harden. The best you can hope with intellectual engagement is to bring it up for argument in a collective ethos of a classroom, and, if it comes alive,
then perhaps several children will consider it worth revisiting—their own viewpoints, their own attitudes and so on. And in the long run of their lives, we can hope that something might happen some day from the seeds you sowed. That is the best that can happen.

Now, about the national movement—how we can deal with that? I think, first of all, the history teacher has to remember that the whole history syllabus is rather messed up because it is not in tune with children’s own cognitive development. In fact, that is true of the sciences and social sciences syllabi as well. History deals with time and imagination spread across long periods of time. The history teacher by himself/herself cannot find a solution to a systemic problem. But the history teacher can make certain choices, I think, in the context of the national movement—to let children understand the nature of the conflict during this period of national awareness emerging in the South Asian subcontinent. And for that, I think, I agree with our colleagues who helped us to create these remarkable books that, instead of sticking to a narrative almost strung together with causality and consequences and so on, pick up moments that need to be excavated. How did a moment like Dandi get sculpted by circumstances? How did that moment shape what happened later—for good or bad? These round-table conferences and various other things that happened in the 1930s, and Gandhi’s rise from 1915 to 1930—fifteen years—they all emanate from and come together in that moment at Dandi. So, if we choose that moment, not necessarily putting it in a sequence, then perhaps many of the conflicts, like between Gandhi and Ambedkar, and subsequently between Gandhi and Jinnah, and various others who believed in violence versus Gandhi, Hindu nationalism versus Muslim nationalism—all of these
conflicts might fall in place if we choose critical moments for applying our imagination and pursuing enquiry.

We need to put ourselves in those situations without losing sight of the fact that we cannot fully place ourselves in those situations because those situations occurred long ago. We can at best try. So, to some extent, this kind of building of imagination around certain chosen topics and not completing the syllabus (in the sense of telling everything) might help. Teaching is not necessarily ‘telling’, and that is a very difficult lesson for Indian educationalists to learn, because our syllabi—certainly in (nearly all) the provinces—are predicated on the idea that we will tell the children. You will tell them but will they learn? You also used the word ‘learn’. No, they have not learnt all this, they have received the news of all this violence, that is all. Have they actually understood what Bhagat Singh stood for, his highly rational nationalism? Have they really understood what ‘nationalism’ is at the age that you are talking about—14? I think a good history teacher can situate Gandhi of that period in a more multidimensional way to see what Gandhi’s choices were, how he worked, who was this man and so on. Then, perhaps, your question will be answered.

Sachin Tewari. Do you think that somewhere NCERT has been unable to handle the federalist structure in India?

Kumar. The NCERT is not empowered to either impose itself on the states or create anything for them, unless they ask for it. The mandate of the National Council is very limited: to create exemplar material which impresses others; if they are sufficiently impressed, they might do something similar. In this case, they are impressed but they do not quite think that it is worth
going that way. Now, why is it so? This is a subject of
research to see why provincial governments dealing
with the masses feel unsure about such textbooks
which do not really glorify anybody. If you look at the
textbooks in Punjab or Gujarat or contemporary
Maharashtra, produced for provincial board-affiliated
schools, you will be struck by the feeling that this is
what we want our masses to become. The elites can
afford to be liberal, they can afford to have a kind of
bourgeois, leisurely, reflective mind. But the masses are
supposed to get a story which mobilizes them for
causes that are political. This basic inequality between
the high-end and low-end schools, both in India and
in Pakistan, is a crucial factor. Why does education not
serve the cause of peace? In fact, education, as philoso-
pher Jiddu Krishnamurthy pointed out, is the biggest
threat to peace because it mobilizes everyone in terms
of collective identities, particularly national identities.
These identities are far more vociferously expressed in
provincial textbooks. Veronique Benei’s work on Maha-
rashtra textbooks is a prime example of the kind of
problem we have in that state. Even though it is situated
in a ‘rashtra’, its own conception of ‘Maharashtra-ness’
does not come across in the few NCERT schools or
ICSE schools. You will have to visit the schools of the
Maharashtra government, affiliated to the Maharashtra
board, to understand the mass mobilization which text-
books attempt to do.

Romila Thapar. I have three brief comments. The first is
that I have been sitting here since the morning and the
one word that has gone through my mind is ‘socializa-
tion’. So, I am just delighted that you took the oppor-
tunity to explore the meaning of socialization. I think
you are absolutely right—there is a close relationship
between education and socialization. I think this one aspect of socialization that we probably emphasized enough is that there is a political intention which we may not be fully aware of but which we should be aware of. Not in terms of a political argument on the stage of writing textbooks, but that there is politics in a cultural item which is called a textbook which we should be aware of.

My second point is: Are we not putting too much emphasis and responsibility on the discipline of history alone? The other disciplines also matter. I was delighted when Naina this morning talked about Sanskrit textbooks, because some of the attitudes you get in the other disciplines are not attitudes conducive to the kind of thinking we have been advocating. So, I think a lot of cross-indexing may also be necessary. If I am making a particular point about language and history of a particular period, is it also reflected in the books on those languages that we are learning? Is that attitude there or not?

Finally, I think for cross-indexing, and for the exploration of ideas, the one thing that we have not thought about is using new technology. What about something like the web? Say, if we were to take a textbook, put it on the web, and go through it chapter by chapter, paragraph by paragraph, saying this is the further meaning of what is being said, these are the kind of sources we are using, pictures of some of these sources—the multiple courses of an event can be demonstrated pictorially on the web more effectively than by writing about them. I should think that they become much more dramatic for the child—the child might be able to understand it much better. So, in this triangular relationship between student, teacher and
parent, which is the relationship involved in the socialization of education? The web could come in as a very important instrument in agency of bringing this information, knowledge, the way in which to analyse knowledge, critical enquiry to these three categories.

**Kumar.** I would like to respond. I do not think I will have any quarrel at all. Does history matter more than any other subject? Or, is this a special responsibility of the historian to improve the teaching of history in schools? On this question, I think we must deal with the larger issue of ‘What is the aim of education?’ The aim of education at a school has to be, or at least one of its aims has to be, to find out how things came to be the way they are. Every other aspect that surrounds the child, every other phenomenon in this world which a child can explore with his or her own effort—why does the sun set in the west?—a child will find out soon enough. Even the more complicated questions of biology might become accessible to a curious child by his or her own effort. The same can be said, to some extent, about mathematics. But what happened in this area of Tollygunge before independence? What happened in this city 200 years ago? These are questions that the child will have to be induced to discover with the help that somebody will have to provide. The past is otherwise gone, it has only left a few marks. And to value those remnants of the past, one requires this socialization into being curious and respectful of what the past has left. So if the child says: ‘How did things come to be?—I want to know because I have joined the world now;’—that is who the child is basically. And he or she understands that this ‘now’ carries a legacy. He or she is able to reason that there is a series of things that has gone before them which impinges on their existence, their choices, their future and everything, without
being daunted by that terrible sense that their life has already been shaped.

The ability to know how things came to be the way they are is part of the ability to cope and deal with life now. And, I think, that is why history matters more than any other social science in terms of how it is to be handled. That is perhaps one reason why many eminent scholars like Dewey believed that it was very difficult to introduce history in schools, and that challenge remains. In what form and at what point, in what kind of generic sort of design, can children be inducted into a community of people who treat the past as an object of curiosity, as an object of wondering about it rather than fighting about it, or wanting to change it? Like the words used for the 1992 exercise of demolishing the Babri Mosque—the words were: ‘Hum itihaas ki bhool sudhaar rahein hain’ [We are correcting the error of history]. Now that attitude, that we can correct history 400 years later, being espoused by such a large number of people, of course, as a result of political mobilization—nevertheless, that idea itself—we may want to say it is crazy, but it requires us to be able to demonstrate why it is crazy. Because that object, had it stood for some more time, perhaps would have given us more ideas about what life was 400 years ago. But, now it is not there any more and we cannot engage with it. For these reasons, I feel that I must disagree with you, if you think that history matters as much as some other subjects. Sanskrit, of course, matters and the new Sanskrit textbooks that NCERT produced during the same 2006–08 exercise have not interested people much—partly because so few people study Sanskrit, and many schools have actually not used those books. A lesson on Pandita Ramabai garnered controversy for which no media agency or institution contributed,
helping NCERT to retain that lesson although it was criticized by very powerful Sanskrit scholars. So do other languages. And in cohesive curriculum designing, each subject has a contribution to make. There is no question about that. Having said that, there is something about history that we must acknowledge as a special challenge for the teacher as well as the curriculum designer.

As for your idea about the Internet, the world today is divided between techno-romantics and techno-sceptics. I certainly do not know where the middle now stands. A few years ago, in the NCERT itself when I was serving it, I thought there was a middle, that one could use the web for constructive ends, and we used the web to some extent by creating e-versions of these books, providing deeper windows into other sources and exactly the kinds of things you are saying and suggesting, and I would like to believe that that is possible. But, as the Internet itself is developing, one doesn’t really know whose instrument it is and how it works. None of us know it. And as for educational theorists and psychologists and others, many of them have expressed very serious apprehensions about what the senior American child psychologist David Elkind has called ‘the new technological environment’ which surrounds the growing child. His classic *The Hurried Child* reminds us that this new age of information technology pulls the child too soon and too aggressively into getting totally confused between information and learning. He has posed a series of challenges to schools asking them to tread very cautiously along this line. I am certainly the wrong person to respond to your hope, but I only hope that you are right.
Krishna Kumar taught at the University of Delhi and served as Director of NCERT. He is currently an Honorary Professor at Punjab University, Chandigarh. A bilingual author, a columnist and a writer for children, his major books include Politics of Education in Colonial India, What is Worth Teaching, The Child’s Language and the Teacher, Prejudice and Pride, Battle for Peace, A Pedagogue’s Romance and Education, Conflict and Peace. The Routledge Handbook of Education in India edited by Professor Kumar has been released recently.
‘We tell our students about the mistakes made in the past and how those mistakes can be corrected now.’

‘Not every conflict is worth discussing or analysing. If you keep talking about conflicts with young children, religious conflicts or caste conflicts, you keep those alive.’

‘Do you want a history class to become a battleground or a sulking ground?’

‘We speak about the conflicts in such a way that the students, in their future, can correct the mistakes made by the previous generation.’

‘I really like to focus on good things in history, the achievements of great people, for instance, Jhansi ki rani.’

‘As a history teacher, I do not want to sulk in front of my students. No matter what you do, you can never ever make a 14/15-year-old mind interested in history. It is boring to the core. I myself find it so dull and lifeless.’
These were the responses of a group of about 300 history teachers when they were responding to one question: Why teach history to school students? These teachers had travelled from different parts of the country to Delhi and I interacted with them in batches of 50. My goal was to help them appreciate the simple aims of teaching history according to the National Curriculum Framework of 2005. I noticed one common feature across all the batches—for all of them, teaching history rested upon the idea of identifying and correcting mistakes made in the past. I tried to challenge them to think how corrections could be made or even attempted in the present, in a time when the concerned people of those circumstances no longer existed. But the teachers got rattled and angry, and burst into incoherent, long speeches on religion, caste and associated conflicts.

The main point of those outbursts were the need to respect and maintain Indian culture without finding faults in order to bury the tensions rather than repeat them in front of a new generation. Despite my repeated efforts, the discussion could not be conducted in a coherent way nor taken to its conclusion. So I had to abandon it. I had to abandon it in all the six batches sooner or later. What the teachers were not willing to tolerate was that history can be considered as an account of the forces and forms of social life. They did not like the idea that history is also a study of the process of becoming a society and its mode of organization. They simply could not agree that the aim of the history teacher is to enable the young learners to see—in their imaginations—the forces which favour and allow people’s cooperation or conflicts. Nor could they see their own role in using information to construct a vivid picture of how and why people did something, how they thought, how they achieved their successes or came to their failures.
For them, history did not represent humanity’s engagement with various forces, issues or nature. Neither did it involve advances in civilization that involved the use of intelligence and cooperation.

Notwithstanding their initial refusals and setbacks, I made another attempt to develop a wider understanding about the resources required to teach history. I wanted teachers to know that the pedagogic experience in a history classroom should be consistent with the nature and character of knowledge and history. They had already hinted to me at the very beginning that, no matter what one does, students cannot be persuaded to like history. ‘The subject is such, after all.’ Pushed to think about resources other than the prescribed textbooks, their responses went to the other extreme, to guide books, but remained focused on their own telling. The ‘teaching by telling’ frame was so strongly enshrined in their pedagogic glory that not one of them even uttered the word ‘museum’. So I brought in this missing entity by asking them to read a short reflective piece by psychologist Bruno Bettelheim in which he reflects on his childhood experiences of visiting several museums in Vienna, although never for any ‘great’ purpose. The value of museums, he writes, is to stimulate a child’s or adolescent’s imagination, to arouse their curiosity so that they may feel the need to think more deeply about what they are exposed to and, more importantly, to give young people a feeling of awe for various things in the world. The idea brought the group to the second point of strong disagreement—history involves wondering, about the past for the sake of it, being excited about the past for the sake of it.

Again, the teachers could not agree with me. The more I tried, the more assertive they grew in their denials. Their main argument was that if you allow every learner to wonder, to think, to imagine, to theorize, to draw linkages, you
cannot maintain a coherent narrative. History learning must teach them to remember and appreciate one narrative, a singular, coherent narrative. They were absolutely clear that it was not so much about the lack of resources or visits to the museums—their reliance on their own telling to teach history was absolutely impermeable. Challenged to the last bit as a teacher/educator, I decided to focus my energies to understand, to situate their ideas in their context, in their circumstances, because, after all, this is what history trains us to be or do. Though I studied it only till Class 10, I grew fairly conscious of understanding things in their context and circumstances.

So, who is a teacher teaching at school and who is teaching history at school? In order to understand the absence of historical temper from the discourse in these workshops that Professor Nair discussed yesterday, it became really important for me understand the sociology of a teacher, to understand who was in front of me as a history teacher. Many people who study history to its advanced stages have confessed that they do not actually engage with schools. Even though they are interested in schools, they do not really do much work with schoolteachers or with schools. That is true for economists, mathematicians and physicists as well. School becomes a ‘lowly’ entity to engage with for academicians and scholars. But the school engages you year after year, supplying you with the raw material—you teach the person whom the school or the school-teacher has already taught. At the university level, we work with students whom the school teachers send to us. So who comes to school to teach history becomes a very pertinent and relevant issue. This is where I grew interested in the academic biography of those 300 teachers who had challenged all my notions and made sure that I did not achieve even a single goal I had set for myself. What I found from
their academic biographies was that 47 per cent of those teachers actually studied sciences at undergraduate levels, one had also served as a science TGT (Trained Graduate Teacher), had taught from classes 6 to 10, and, later, for career advancement or for several other compulsions, done a Master’s degree in history through correspondence in order to teach at the senior level. And this was quite a large number.

Then, the second category emerged—teachers who were victims of the system and the principals. This category, comprising 34 per cent, said it was trained in geography or political science, subjects radically different from history. These teachers acknowledged that they were not trained in the subject but that neither the principal nor the system paid any heed to that. The prevalent theory is: If you are trained in any of the social sciences, you are automatically considered eligible to teach history, political science and geography. The geography people felt more miserable about themselves than those from political science, and a good 12 per cent of them mentioned that they studied history because they were weak students in school in terms of academic performance. Seven per cent of the teachers studied history by choice or out of the larger choices of the stream—history was a compulsory subject in the social sciences or arts stream.

These patterns were consistent with what I have been observing during my interactions with students in the B.Ed. programme at Delhi University. Some of you might be aware that there have been serious reforms in education, especially in teacher education for secondary and senior secondary levels. The B.Ed. programme has been strengthened in terms of its curriculum components and duration. It has become a two-year programme. I have been teaching a course called Knowledge, Discipline and School Subjects
in the new programme, in which students pursue investigative ideas such as ‘every discipline has a distinctive structure of knowledge and different ways of constructing knowledge’, ‘the habits of the mind’, ‘specific data collection and interpretation skills for every discipline’ and so on. Thus every discipline poses distinct pedagogic demands on its teachers. In the process, the B.Ed. students also reflect on their choice of subject—why they studied a particular subject, how did it become their choice and what impact did that choice have on their abilities to engage in the theoretical structure of their subjects and the status of every discipline in school, hierarchy and society in general. To this purpose, they write reflective essays identifying factors that allow them to engage with the discipline which helps form the axis of their pedagogy and to identity those factors in the school curriculum. I have analysed about 300 of these essays, written over a period of three years. I am presenting to you now only the analysis of essays written by those who will or who have already become history teachers.

The first theme that emerged in these essays was that it was never a personal choice. What they studied or what they opted to study in Class 11 was on the basis of the score in the public examination conducted in Class 10. The first 10 years of schooling could not enable them to identify their passions, their inclination or their preferences—an external assessment settled it for them. This is true for every subject, not just history or English or Hindi.

The second theme was that popular perceptions such as ‘intelligent people study the sciences’ shape their emotions about their own intelligence. Even if they chose not to study the sciences and opted for history or political science or the arts, they were convinced that they were engaging with inferior fields of knowledge and were ‘less’ intelligent themselves.
The third theme was that the strugglers of the science subjects found respite in history at the undergraduate level. Somehow they carried on with the sciences in the secondary and senior secondary levels. And when they’d had enough, they shifted to history. Or, the college admission processes were such that they opted for economics or English or history or political science, and my students landed up in history—English being the top choice for the shifters. Now, this shift implies a very personalized sense of failure—an inability to engage with knowledge that enjoys top status in the school hierarchy, i.e. the sciences. So, from facts or formula application, logical and tightly structured reasoning and exact expression in the sciences to probable truth, emphasis on coherence in the narrative and richness in meaning and establishing facts along with meaning in history. Here you are establishing facts while in the sciences you are given the facts. This shift is a demanding one to reconcile with, and requires a considerable engagement on the part of the teacher at the undergraduate programme to help the students cope with it. What I found in the case of my students is that most of them had not reconciled to this and hence were confused and continued to think that the sciences were much better!

The fourth theme was that a large number of them felt frustrated with the density of knowledge at the higher levels in history. They started dislikeing history, some of them dropped out of the Master’s programme or did not pursue a Master’s at all, but they are going to become history teachers. They came to do B.Ed. because they have had enough of history, they cannot study history any further. This is where I realized that how sorry the state of higher education was. Who is the victim in all this? The victim is the school because, now, this higher education system sends those candidates to schools as teachers. Candidates who
dislike a subject but will become the representatives of it—they do not like this subject they will be teaching but are taking the role of inducting younger people in the community who still cherish and appreciate the knowledge that history offers.

There were only 4 per cent who enjoyed history even though they also came to it after facing failures in other fields. The schoolteachers’ data I presented earlier and the B.Ed. students’ data together establish the criticality of the missing link between the school history and the higher-education history. If we analyse it carefully and try to find what it is that teachers are not able to do in terms of learning history, we will have to think about learning in the way that the famous psychologist Jerome Bruner has. According to Bruner, learning involves two kinds of transfers: one is the direct transfer of a specific applicability of tasks that are similar to the originally learnt task—so you learn to calculate simple interest, compound interest and you keep calculating it all your life. That is a very simple transfer. Two, learning a general idea that includes transfers of principles and attitudes. This type of transfer is at the heart of the educational process and involves the continued broadening and deepening of knowledge in terms of basic and general ideas. This is the transfer that most suits the character of history as a discipline and its teaching. This is exactly what our teachers had not internalized.

The National Curriculum Framework 2005 emphasizes the need to let the young learner experience how a historian thinks, what the habits of the mind are that a historian develops and employs. The narratives of teachers I have presented to you reveal that we have not done enough to enable a schoolteacher in that role. This conference is about the idea of culture—why is it that the idea of culture that schoolteachers engage with and entertain in their
minds is rather banal and lacks complexity? The ability of teachers to engage with complex and layered ideas of secularism, nationalism or even gender is yet to be developed. How can history teaching contribute to peace unless the history teacher is at home with the ideas or constructs of secularism or equality? If these continue to feel like borrowed constructs that have no significant place or contribution to make in our society, the teachers’ own ability to contribute or to engage the next generation in such ideas stands compromised. The time has more than come for us to say the opposite of what is said on such stages or platforms: that we are sorry that we do not engage in schools. The time has come to say that we better engage with schools, we better engage with schoolteachers proactively to claim integrity to our own discipline. It is about knowledge in history, after all. As Professor Thapar pointed out—in most schools and colleges, the students of history are still learning the subject in the same way it was taught one, or probably two, generations ago despite the advancements in technology and ever-increasing exposure. Unless the academicians in the universities reach out or engage with the schools and schoolteachers, the knowledge base will not develop. The schoolteacher of history will continue to feel burdened by the aspirations of the historian and history will continue to be perceived as an ‘inferior’ subject which is not the business of intelligent people—as was very evident in the reflective essays written by my students. If we really want young people to be excited about history and we want them to become history teachers capable of promoting peace, the schoolteacher is going to need our active and constant support.
Audience Member 1. I just wanted to talk about two issues. One, to add to your concern about who becomes a history teacher. It is very gendered, on top of everything else. Two: for the past two-three years, I have been conducting a six-month module called ‘School, Society and Socialization’ with teachers who will be joining schools and teaching up to Classes 2 or 3, maybe 4. And this whole issue of socialization comes as a revelation to them. From what I know, it is not discussed in the B.Ed. programme at all. And, really, the beginning of it is for teachers to understand their own sense of self, understand their own socialization and then take an objective view of who they are and why they think the way they do. And that it is not simply or only to do with religion or secularism or community. That link between school and society that socialization provides, that is a circular link that keeps coming back through the teachers’ own childhoods to when they are working with children in the classroom. I think you have touched upon that in many ways without really naming it, but if you could comment on that a little bit further.

Gupta. First, I very purposefully chose not to bring in gender because anything that is done via correspondence is favoured by women. I did not want to get into that. The second point about socialization—it is not true that this is not taught at the B.Ed. level. Even in the unreformed one-year B.Ed. programme, there was always such a course. Maybe it had different names in different parts of the country—‘Basic issues in educational theory’, ‘Ideas in education’, but socialization did indeed constitute a significant part of it. But, yes, a
teacher’s/educator’s own imagination on how to teach socialization—that is a different issue. And it is not just coming from sociology. Socialization also falls in the realm of psychology. So, you must have a very balanced view on socialization from both sociological and psychological perspectives. Unless you have applied Sudhir Kakar’s theories in an Indian classroom, you cannot really develop a very scientific understanding of socialization. And it takes a lot. I, for that matter, represent a very privileged group of teachers trained in Delhi University in B.El.Ed programme in which there was a one-year-long practicum called ‘self-development in workshop’. We spent one year continuously reflecting and introspecting on our own socialization. We would have day-long sessions on even jokes—who do we joke about, which are the communities that we joke about, why are there certain kinds of jokes about women? So, socialization cannot be taught as one topic—it is one of the biggest challenges the teacher faces, and teachers/educators or any undergraduate curriculum or even school classrooms should face it as a challenge in every field of knowledge. Even with the sciences, for that matter. When you are developing the so-called scientific temper, you are actually challenging what you have learnt at home about many things. Thus, socialization cannot be a topic-based agenda. It has to go on, throughout school, and I would say some part of higher education too must spend its energy challenging people to constantly think about their own thought process and how they relate with others.

Sometimes, by writing or creating a book or by doing a one-day or a three-day workshop, we think we have done enough, but, the truth is: we are not able to do enough because it requires engagement by many
teachers. When science teachers, history teachers, political science teachers—when all of them challenge these notions together, only then can we begin. History teachers, I feel, are often more self-critical because a lot of stereotypes seep in into looking at the past. They constantly ask themselves: Why do I think like this? And, more often than not, the answer is: Because my parents have told me this community’s people are like this. I found out that as young as four-year-old children have prejudices about other communities. Because the parents had said so. So, all teachers have to engage, but history teachers particularly, because they can challenge the source of ideas or the rootedness of those stereotypes.

**Audience Member 2.** I am a schoolteacher and you have sent me into deep depression. Do you feel that your sample is OK or that it’s skewed? Have you never come across teachers who are genuinely interested in history or people who do not find history boring? Because, otherwise, this is shocking!

**Gupta.** I had an idea that in this audience the story would be different—because we are in the state of West Bengal, where history enjoys a special status—to quote my ex-student who is sitting here. She is from Delhi University and she is now studying history, and according to her, ‘When teachers teach history here, there is a spark in their eyes!’ Clearly, Delhi teachers did not have that spark in their eyes while teaching history. So, I know West Bengal is a land of history. I also took some guidance from my supervisor, Professor Krishna Kumar, on why history is associated with West Bengal even more than it is with Delhi University and JNU. I would request you to recollect what he told you—that, despite all the intellectual ethos and the glory that
universities have enjoyed, the state government is impermeable. The history textbooks are what they are everywhere. So, yes, your point about history teachers—I have definitely come across a few who enjoy their subject. But those teachers who tell me they do not enjoy the subject or that they can never make it interesting—they are more worrisome. I wouldn’t want to step out to find a compensatory data. I would rather like to think about why we have driven schoolteachers to the point where they end up doing what they do not want to do. What is lacking in our resources, in their education that could not develop the excitement for history?

**Audience Member 3.** Why do we give textbooks so much importance? Even if the state government has prescribed certain textbooks, don’t you think teachers can also do things on their own?

**Gupta.** If I was teaching at a school and I was governed by the great phenomenon at the end of the year—examinations—then I would also follow the textbook. The university has a flexible structure but come the month of January, that flexibility goes out of the window. Then I too start thinking about what will happen in the examination!

**Audience Member 4.** You’re right, but at least till December we can do something?

**Gupta.** I am talking about my plight. The schoolteacher does not have annual exams. The schoolteacher has three exams—first term, second term and third term, or half-yearly, formative, assistive. Therefore, many kinds of assessments. That is always there to control the teacher’s activities in the classroom.

**Audience Member 5.** One of the things I wanted to mention was that there might be another point in the
data set that we should think about or we could add, and that is caste. What is the caste of the people who end up teaching history in schools? I bring this up because I was very struck by something that one of your respondents said—the need to respect and maintain Indian culture. It seemed like a lot of your respondents said that—or something along those lines. This desire to respect and maintain Indian culture, to me, seems like a very ‘savarna’ concern. I do not think a Dalit or a Muslim would necessarily be that concerned about maintaining the integrity of culture. I am just asking this because I am in the American context now, where white privileges are constantly being challenged, and, I think, there needs to be more self-reflection, self-criticism actually, in parts of challenging our socialization about the ‘savarna’ privilege in this country and how that also influences the teaching of history.

**Gupta.** This was a group of teachers serving the government, so it had to have been a balanced mix. In any case, it is not politically correct these days to really collect data about one’s caste. Even if it is written, it is not easy to collect—so, I could not have done that. But I can tell you that, in service programmes, in freshers’ programmes, there is always a representation of different caste groups. Because, in government jobs, there are different caste groups represented. I went to great lengths to engage with one particular teacher—even though I was finally the one who surrendered—and I said that if he really appreciated the idea of culture so much, then we should bring back the practice of ‘sati’. Let us start burning women—that was also part of our culture. You can imagine how aggressive he got, how angry he got, and what circumstances transpired . . . Yes, you are right. But generally, in such settings, and not just here, even in university settings, the custodians and guardians
of culture are usually upper-caste men and women. And people coming from different castes and religious groups usually keep quiet in such tense discussions.

**Tina Servaia.** I am very proud to say that I took history because I loved it, but I do realize that that is a privilege. My question is that we have been talking about—and this thought has been there in my head—that only if the history teacher is completely equipped can we become independent of the textbook. And I am so glad that we are talking about the B.Ed. But we also need to talk about the University Grants Commission. We have to reflect on what the top echelon of our intellectual system or academia is doing to educate—not just teachers but graduates who later become teachers. And when we are in the profession, the need to empower us and give us resources. I cannot tell you how difficult and time-consuming it is to find resources to make our lessons interesting even when we have every intention and desire to do so. So, I think more onus needs to shift upwards. Instead of only looking at the NCERT, we need to move the conversation to the UGC, and I’d like your thoughts on what can be done to just empower the interested teacher first. Even before we try to reform the uninterested teachers—that is an entirely different challenge.

**Gupta.** I dream of a day when college teachers, colleges, university teachers and universities will feel interested, sufficiently interested, in schoolteachers. There are resources in college libraries, and I imagine that schoolteachers should have access to those resources too, a very continuous kind of direct engagement. Because any field, not just history, is developing constantly. And the teacher is a person who, once out of the system, is out. It depends largely on the school or
the autonomous bodies to organize some interaction here and there once in five years. But as you said, for the interested teachers, and also for the not-so-interested ones, if these kind of linkages are drawn . . . If the college teachers open the doors on Saturdays, Sundays, or Friday afternoons, or even Thursday afternoons, engage with the students, then I think an organic community of practitioners can be built up. In my institution, we used to have an M.Ed. part-time programme. And teachers of my institution always said that their experience of teaching teachers in the part-time programme enriched their own abilities to teach. So, this is there, I think, even for those who have come to teach history without sufficient training in history but are now in the system, they are going to teach for the next 30 years or so. It is for the higher-education institutions to take interest—and they must take interest. Because, after all, for the next 30 years, students will continue to be taught by these teachers. So, it is the lack of interest in the schoolteacher and complete lack of interest in the college and university—that’s where I see the problem, and that’s also exactly where I see some hope as well.

This is not to disrespect the individuals, many of them sitting in this room, who have been taking interest and going out of their way to interact with schoolteachers. But one interaction in one year does not really suffice. Because to train the mind to think in the way in which an expert in the field thinks and construct knowledge—for that you need more consistent engagement. When you read, somebody has to explain things to you. Now, in the case of those 47 per cent teachers who had done their Master’s in history through correspondence, what is it that they lack? They
lack being taught by someone who has a historical perspective. They lack being taught by someone who was inducted in the community, in the company of somebody. So, direct teaching is when you learn in the company of some people, and this is where we realize that history and English are two of the ‘sufferer’ subjects or disciplines. People learn on their own—or try to—so they do not really get inducted.

**Audience Member 6.** I used to teach at an ICSE school in Mumbai, and we were dealing with this problem of teachers teaching history but not being interested in history themselves. They were trained in language but had been forced to teach history. So, what we did was re-organize the timetable in such a way where we could include something called ‘integrated learning’. The history, English and Hindi teachers worked together in such a way that the curriculum of all three could be taught and it was interesting for the teachers as well as the students.

**Gupta.** That is nice

**Audience Member 7.** My question is a little radical. Based on my school experience, I used to think I was a really smart student. My exam results, however, suggested otherwise—but, I guess, where I am in life suggests that it didn’t matter. I used to look at teachers as mediums and, according to me, it did not really matter that that teacher was not grounded in mathematics but was teaching me mathematics anyway, or not grounded in history but teaching me history anyway. Ultimately, I used to look up to the teacher just to inspire me to learn on my own. And, to be absolutely honest, while you were showing the survey, I was thinking about the teachers I liked best. It turns out (and this goes all the way up to university level) that none of their grounding was in the subject that they taught.
Gupta. How did UGC allow that appointment if they did not have Master’s in that subject at the undergraduate level?

Audience Member 7. I have no idea.

Gupta. Did you grow up in India?

Audience Member 7. My Master’s was not in India, so, maybe, UGC—thankfully—was not there. But my schooling was. I was taught history by a teacher who was a zoologist, and I don’t know how they did not have an M.A. in history and taught me history anyway, and I really feel emotional about it.

Gupta. We tend to get emotional in such settings, we also get autobiographical. After all, all of us were taught by our parents first. My mother did not go to school beyond Class 10, but she taught me everything, she made me learn, memorize, and I became a successful candidate. My father, the most strict man, ensured that I learnt even if I did not comprehend simple interest or compound interest. My point is that we are not discussing individual excitement. We are discussing the ability of a teacher to excite 40 minds, 50 minds. And not always only 40 or 50, but 70, 80, 90 minds—this is where the capacity of the teacher is stretched. And unless you have a grounding and unless you are trained to engage the young mind on a continuous basis and keep them thinking, it becomes really difficult.

Audience Member 7. Not specifically in that subject. I agree with you absolutely that the grounding determines what the teacher teaches, but it may not necessarily be in that subject—that’s all I’m trying to say.

Gupta. That is why we have only one Rishi Valley in Bangalore, and Krishnamurthi himself had become dissatisfied with that school and he went to Blue Mountain in Ooty and established another. So, freedom is good,
flexibility is good, but when we start stretching it to the other extreme, just like the UGC or school systems’ recruitment rules are stretched to one end, then we are in a problem. Because if you do not have grounding, then history teachers completely miss that history—imagination. Imagining the forces that lead people to behave or think or act in a particular way. They start thinking of history literally as a story of man, ‘his story’. That is what the teachers taught me in that workshop. So, grounding means that you spend time in the company of those who have thought about these issues, who have constructive knowledge and that has its own value for every discipline. Do not forget that Kothari Commission already made it compulsory for all the students to learn all subjects till Class 10, so that basic training of the mind is done for 10 years. Once you are getting into the specialized way of thinking, you do not need the company of a specialized person whose mind is trained and who has those habits, mental habits, intellectual habits to think in a particular way. So, we may get exciting teachers at any level, but we really need to get them in the form of schoolteachers, or parents or even tutors for the younger years. I did not present the remaining data of my students here, but none of them had actually mentioned their schoolteachers as sources of excitement or passion. Those who did—they mentioned their tutors. So, there is this idea that the source of passion or excitement can come from anywhere, but our aim should be that, for every learner, the school classroom should be the source of excitement and, for that, I see the role of schoolteachers as vital. Not to forget, in this country, where a large number of children come to school without getting much support at home, the schoolteacher is their only hope in life for any kind
of advancement and for induction in the community of knowledge. So, if we really think in such flexible terms, we might end up doing injustice to a large number of children whose whole and sole support is the teacher at school.

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I must start with a confession: I am not a historian. I have been a history teacher only because I have a fascination for stories—be it stories of the present or stories of the past. And I developed this curiosity, I think, only after I stopped studying history in school. Unfortunately, I did not feel so excited and curious when I was in school; but after that, when I travelled and lived in different places and I saw the world around me, I realized that there are stories just waiting to be discovered and taking those into the classroom is what really excited me. So about a year ago, I moved to Bangalore and I got associated with an organization called Rereeti. Rereeti is a young organization, about three years old, working with museum spaces, heritage spaces, trying to make them more interactive, more exciting for the local communities. So, whether it is children in schools, citizens, the public, adults, families, anybody who is interested and lives around that space—it works on how to make that space more interactive for them.

World War I ended in 1918. Rereeti began to wonder about what really happened at that time and what was
India’s role in it—particularly Bangalore and Mysore’s role. We embarked on this particular adventure in February this year [2018], it being the centenary of the war. So it is just a six-month-old project. All I am going to do today is share with you this adventure so far. To begin with, I will share some clues we found in the city of Bangalore and then invite you to arrive at your own deductions about what these clues could mean, maybe even piece together a story from them.

This is one of the first pictures: a column we found at R T Nagar or Munireddy Palya. You can see the plaque mentioning that the column is sacred to the memory of those officers and non-commissioned officers and men of the Mysore Imperial Service Troops who gave their lives during the 1914–1918 world war.

The left side of the column says: ‘The Mysore Transport Corps’ and it lists places where we assume the Corps had gone and fought—Tigris Kut-al-Amara, Baghdad, Mesopotamia—and the years are mentioned as 1916 to 1917. The right side says: ‘Mysore Lancers’ and it mentions the Suez Canal, Egypt, Megiddo, Gaza, Damascus, Palestine—again, the years are mentioned as 1917–1918. The middle one lists names—it is a roll of honour for people who lost their lives during these years at these places.
Message from HH the Maharaja of Mysore was printed and copies sent to soldiers and officers at the front –

“At this hour of supreme struggle of the British Empire and its Allies, you enjoy the great honour of forming a part, however small, of the magnificent army which is fighting for the cause of liberty and righteousness. We have heard with keen pleasure and pride of your heroic conduct in the field and of your brilliant successes. We have no doubt that whatever the duty assigned to you, you will do it in such a way as will add fresh lustre to the country and uphold the high traditions of Mysore for loyalty and devotion to the Crown of England. Day by day and minute by minute, you are present in our thoughts and our prayers. Those dear to you whom you have left behind are our sacred charge until you return victorious. Remember always in whatever you do that the fair name and honour of Mysore are in your keeping and that to an Indian, honour is dearer and far more precious than life. Have firm faith in Providence and in the justness of our cause and by the grace of Almighty God you shall be safe and successful.”

Source - Mysore’s part in the War 1914 – 1918

This is a message from His Highness the Maharaja of Mysore. It was printed and copies were sent to soldiers and officers at the front. It is a really long message but I would like to draw your attention to a few lines: ‘At this hour of supreme struggle of the British Empire and its allies, you enjoy the great honour of forming a part, however small, of the magnificent army which is fighting for the cause of liberty and righteousness [. . .] We have no doubt, whatever the duty assigned to you, you will do it in such a way, as well as, will add fresh lustre to the country and uphold the high traditions of Mysore for loyalty and devotion to the Crown of England’. This is the message that the Maharaja of Mysore sent to his troops at the front.

This is an image of a stamp that has been released early this year in Israel which marks Haifa and what happened in Haifa. You can see the image of the Indian cavalry and the mention of World War I.
This is an extract from an army dispatch sent by General Sir Edmund Allenby dated October 31, 1918. Here too I would like to draw your attention to a few lines at the end: ‘While the Mysore Lancers were clearing the rocky slopes of Mount Carmel, the Jodhpur Lancers charged through the defile and riding over the enemy machine guns, galloped into the town where a number of Turks were speared on the streets. Over 1,350 prisoners and 17 guns were taken in this operation.’

So, this is just a sample of some of the clues. Has anybody pieced together some kind of a story from this? Maybe we have time for one or two responses? Do you have questions after seeing these clues? Any ideas about whose war it was? Who was fighting?

When we started and we came upon these clues, we did not find them in this order. This is just how I have placed them for you. We had many questions, for we felt we held only one strand in a very complicated story. Yes, Mysore and Bangalore played a role. We had the voice of the Maharaja telling us it was our duty, that we really needed to be there at the front. But where was the voice of the soldier? Did he feel the same sense of duty? Or did he
not? What were the others doing in Mysore at that time? The families of the soldiers—did they feel the same sense of loyalty? What was happening in Bangalore—because Bangalore Cantonment is one the oldest cantonments in the country. There was an entire community of British officers and families as well as Indian units living there. What was happening there? Were they also being sent to war? What did they think about it? And then the larger picture—what was happening in the rest of India? So, we set about trying to find more clues to see if we could put some kind of a story together.

This is Bangalore Cantonment. Lots of old schools, churches, hospitals, institutions, memories, stories. We wanted some of those stories. We got records from some of these institutions—not all. Some we were able to access; some were in tatters. Church records and burial registers told us which units of the British regiments were present at that time. School records that St. Joseph’s Boys’ High School shared with us, magazines of 1914–1915 which mentioned old boys who’d gone to war, even first-person accounts of what they did there—that was a huge resource and treasure.
We found a statue of an unknown soldier with a roll of honour.

Another statue at St. Joseph’s Boys’ High School with a roll of honour.

We did a comparison of these names and we realized that many of the names were the same, but there were no units, no regiments mentioned. So, how do we find out who these people were?

This is a very interesting space. It was a tea room constructed during the war years in the St. John’s High School compound. Today, it is the school canteen. So, a hundred-year-old building serving the same purpose—earlier for soldiers, today for students. And there is a cenotaph in the same complex bearing the names of soldiers who died in the war. All these names in the Cantonment monuments are British soldiers’ names. So, again, where were the Indian regiments? Where were the Indian soldiers? Was it just the Mysore troops that went? Were there other native regiments that were part of the British army? At every step, we just kept having more questions and ended up looking for more answers.

This is a monument located right in the middle of one of the most popular roads in Bangalore—Brigade Road. And it is called the Pioneer Corps Memorial. It is a
memorial to the First Madras Pioneers, one of the units which started in the 1700s under the Madras Presidency and then moved to Bangalore Cantonment some time in the 1800s and set up base near Ulsoor Lake. They are still based there. Today, they are called the Madras Engineering Group or the MEG. We realized that they also must have played a role in the war. So we went to the MEG cantonment and visited the museum.

There is a memorial inside the MEG grounds which earlier existed outside, near the lake. It is called the Sapper Memorial and all the plaques around it mention names of people who were part of Queen Victoria’s Own Sappers and Miners—that is what the unit was called. All of these people took part in different theatres of war, they had very specialized roles. The Sapper or Miner is someone who does engineering tasks in the military, in the army—the people who dug the trenches, demolished bridges, constructed new bridges and invented something that was used even in World War II—we found out all of this when we visited their museum. We found photographs, strategy maps, award certificates. What you see on the left are photographs of the trials of the Bangalore Torpedo being invented. This was a weapon invented in Bangalore by the Sappers and Miners
during World War I. Trials of it were carried out and it was used towards the end of World War I in Mesopotamia, East Africa—nearly two decades later, used more in World War II. So, it is one of the technological inventions of World War I, invented right there in Bangalore.

We were looking for stories of people. The soldiers were still missing from all this. We found names but not too many stories—we did not find letters, we did not find too many photographs. What we did find to start off with was a very endearing story of the grey mule. Since mechanized transport was not very popular during World War I, there were very few vehicles and ambulances. Most of what was transported was on the backs of animals—mules and horses. So, the grey mule was enlisted in the Sappers and Miners in about 1903 and it saw active service in World War I. When the war ended, most of these animals were left in the countries where they had been taken, because it was just too expensive to bring them back. The commanding officer of the Sappers and Miners made a special request and the grey mule was brought back. When it retired, it continued to stay on in the MEG premises. In 1920, when a commemoration and the pensioners’ parade took place, it led the parade with its old companion. After it died, it was buried in the MEG grounds and its grave continues to be there. Its four hooves were made into ink stands—two of which were sent to the UK regimental centre and two continued to be in the MEG regimental centre in Bangalore.

We were really amazed by this story and we knew that there were many more. We wanted more ‘people’ stories: What did the soldiers have to say? What kind of lives did they have or lead? Did they want to go to war at all? What did their families have to say? So, that was the purpose behind starting this project. We wanted to see whether there were any memories, any stories that we could try and bring
together, to piece together a wholesome narrative for the children of Bangalore to know what happened in their city a hundred years ago. That is why we started this project. We called it ‘White Pepper Black Pepper’. We named it so because when the soldiers wrote letters, they often used code names to refer to different armies and different people. There are references to the Indian soldiers calling themselves ‘black pepper’, there is also a reference to them calling the British soldiers ‘white pepper’ and ‘red pepper’—there are two or three of these references. And so we went with the ‘White Pepper Black Pepper’.

Like I said, our purpose was to find stories—what had happened a hundred years ago? Are there still memories, stories that we can collect, document and then present, in a way, to the people of the city today? We also wanted to see if there was a local connection to this global event that we study about in school very briefly. World War I is described only through events in Europe, and what happened after seems to be more important—the impact of the war or the consequences of the war. We also wanted to make sure that we were able to take this to schoolchildren not as an academic exercise but as a process in which they could participate, a process that would allow them to make this history their own in some way.

Our project had a couple of phases. We started with background research, and that is work in progress because we’re coming up with new clues every day, and we still have more questions than answers. Nevertheless, whatever we were able to put together, we designed into a three-week school engagement. We were lucky to find three partner schools and I am happy to say that two of them are represented here today—Vidyashilp Academy and St. Joseph’s Boys’ High School. The third is Army Public School PRTC. We wanted to try and get three schools with three different
connections to the war. Army Public School PRTC had a connection with the armed forces; St. Joseph’s Boys’ School, one of the oldest schools in the city was located in the Bangalore Cantonment; Students at Vidyadhip were from families and neighbourhoods in Bangalore with connections that needed to be explored. We decided that we would not just share what we found with the children, but bring them on board as partners in the process of research and curation. In the end, what we wanted was to create a travelling exhibition.

Currently the structure of the travelling exhibition is under production, and, every day, there are updates from the studio where it is being constructed. The exhibition is meant to reach out to schoolchildren beyond our three partner schools. And we hope that it will inspire its viewers with a sense of engagement—not only as spectators but also as those who are engaged with the information and experiences that the exhibition presents.

It has five rooms and the exhibition is built around the story of a child finding in his or her house a trunk containing photographs, letters, a gas mask and various other things which this child has no idea about. The child takes these objects to one of the grandparents, then to the mother, and asks them about these. There are two tunnels, each meant to give the children an experience of what being in the trenches felt like. In the first tunnel, we are going to have smoke. Non-dangerous, non-harmful smoke, and it will be dark. The second one will have ups and down, so that they crouch and crawl as they move through it. We are also trying to have a soldier kit. The original soldier kit weighed more than 35 kg—we are trying to create a kit which children can carry, to see how it felt like to carry your whole world with you. Each of the rooms explores the whole story of World War I through four or five themes—the
events of the war, the other people related to the war, warfare and technology (the most popular topic with the children), and the Bangalore connection.

We hope that through this process of continuing research, we will be able to create an online archive where resources related to India’s role in the war can all be in one place. Because we realize that locating that information is very difficult. There are a lot of archives in other countries containing information on their role in the war and their soldiers, but there is very little that we can look for directly. So, we are hoping to create something like that as well as to share some of the material that we have created for our engagement with schools as teaching-learning resources. Whether it is an infographic which tells you how many soldiers, how much money, how much material, or a map that tells you where Indian soldiers went—we hope to create simple resources and have them uploaded for teachers to access and use in their schools. That is more or less what we have been trying to do or what we are hoping to achieve in the near future.

I have showed you pictures of some of our clues, and this is what we cover with the children when we do sources of history and where we can find this information. While it was easy for us to lay our hands on some of the written information—the state archives, Vidhan Sabha or State Legislative Assembly archives or church records and school records, there have also been books in the recent past where a lot of people have written about India’s role. Some of these books are really beautifully written, some are dry and factual. We just tried to get as much written material as we could and went through them. The oral sources and the material sources—those were where we really struggled. We were very lucky that Bangalore was one of the oldest cantonments, so we found about seven memorial
monuments in the city of Bangalore dedicated exclusively to World War I. Before we started, we thought that there was just the Pioneer Corps Memorial on Brigade Road because that is what everyone sees. But we found six others after that. There may be more—small plaques inside cantonment, barracks, which we may not have found yet.

But it was material related to soldiers—letters, photographs or uniforms—that was an area of struggle. Oral stories, I think, was the one area where we did not find enough. So, we thought that we should start a social media campaign and reach out to people and ask them if their families lived in Bangalore for over a hundred years, or had a connection with World War I, if someone was a descendant of someone who fought in the war, to get in touch with us. Some connections are indeed trickling in, but very, very slowly. We have about 10 contacts now who are descendants of people who fought in World War I and we are looking at ways in which we can document their stories. But, yes, this is an area we have been struggling with.

This research of ours went into schools. We gave our three partner schools the option of having about 20–24-hour engagements, split up into three/four/six sessions of variable durations, because the biggest constraint that schools have is time. How do we take out time in the timetable? How do we make sure that we do not lose out on too many classes or that these sessions are not too short? For instance, a 40-minute engagement for something like this would be difficult. This was one of the things we battled with, but we managed to get time. We divided our engagement into four steps. They were too short to be called ‘phases’. First, learning and capacity building of the children; second, research and enquiry—how they documented that research and presented them, and then, the last two, perspective building and the expression of what they thought about, learnt about and engaged with.
It was a very exciting three weeks in all the three schools. We worked with children across Classes 9 to 12. Some schools gave us Class 9 students, one school gave us a history club which had children from Classes 9 and 10, another school put together a group of children interested in history which was across Classes 9, 10, 11, and 12. So we had all four age groups. We used a lot of maps and visuals in the first few classes to help them place this on a geographic context, because for us to say ‘this happened in Europe and this happened in Austria and this in Turkey’ did not place it anywhere in the children’s heads. So we used maps, we made games around maps, made them find these places as teams—look for new places on the map, whoever remembered a related place could come forward and put it on the map—so, lots of engagement with maps.

We then divided them into the theme groups based on the themes that we had, and each group made a mind-map first on their theme—what was it that they felt could get covered under this particular theme. If their theme was, say, Bangalore connection, then what would be the places where they could get information, what could get covered under this, how would they find more information—because next they were going to embark on the research. They had to bring us information to engage with for the exhibition. So, we gave them some sources. We knew they could not go into libraries and find some of these documents, so we shared with them photocopies of some of these as readings. We gave them links to websites they could check and asked them to get us information—whatever they could about their theme.

The research also included field trips. Each school visited one or two or three sites depending on how much time we had with them and we tried to cover different kinds of memorials, so they could also understand some basic things
about the memorials: Why are they built? What kind of structures constitute memorials? What can you learn from a memorial or a monument? How do you find clues and what do clues tell you? How do you record what you learn? So, we created simple tools and templates in which they could document what they were finding out, as well as document questions to which they did not find answers and felt they needed to go back and find out about more. They also did some artwork around the monuments, trying to represent what they saw as the structure, what it meant to them.

The next phase was putting together all this research and trying to create exhibits for the travelling exhibition. At this stage, we gave them very structured spaces and instructions because we did not have the time to let them do everything that they wanted. We were hoping, of course, that these groups would continue to work on this with their teachers and their schools, and would create their own displays. But, what they did for us was make 3D models for the Bangalore connection. So, the exhibition had a huge map on which were placed 3D models of these memorials the children had made. They created drawings of the medals that were won by Indian soldiers. After finding out about these medals, even created medal index cards based on a sample we found online. They created these for the soldiers of the Mysore Imperial Service Troops who won the Victoria Cross in India, and St. Joseph’s Boys’ School students created it for the former students who had also won awards. We also gave them descriptions of some of these battles from books and encouraged them to visualize it as a strategy map. Because we could not find too many maps, we encouraged them to create those, imagine what it looked like on a map—and a few of the groups were engaged in that. One group in each school also looked at guns and the
use of them as playthings, and if there could be a connection of that with the human tendency for conflict and war. They went around, asking teenagers and parents questions about guns, and then entered that data and even helped us analyse it in a manner.

After research and enquiry, we felt that the facts were one thing, but it was important for them to experience and have some kind of an emotional connect with what had happened during the war. So, we used different tools to help them build a perspective on what the soldier’s life was like. We started by giving them photographs, and, in groups or in pairs, they interpreted these photographs, came up with their own answers and were able to find out small things about the lives of Indian soldiers on the front. We asked them to sit under their tables or under their benches to get the feeling of being in a trench, and read out to them extracts of soldiers’ letters. If you would have seen any of these letters, you would know that some of them are really horrifying. When they first sat under the bench, these children were very amused—they were playful and being silly with each other. But when we started reading out the letters, they started to react. It started with their response to hearing about the assassination of the Archduke. There was an extract by someone from Bengal who had written that ‘when we heard it on the radio, we thought it’s just a small thing and it’ll blow over. Little did we imagine that we would be going across thousands of miles just because that one man was assassinated, to take part in this war’. From there on, to reaching France, to reaching Mesopotamia, to dealing with climatic conditions, to being in the trenches, to being suddenly exposed to new forms of warfare that they had never heard of. For example, the first time chemical gas was released, there was a soldier who wrote back to his family saying, ‘There is a smoke that comes and it just makes us unconscious, you can’t do anything—even if you
have a gun in your hand—to the bombs and shells that were going off and the flame-throwers.’ I don’t know if any of you have heard of flame-throwers—it was a cylinder which had gas that, when released, immediately caught fire. So, the soldier carrying it was in danger of going up in flames if the cylinder burst. And if he aimed it at someone, the nozzle released that gas and that person went up in flames. So, they wrote about this, that there was a kind of ‘magic’ in a cylinder which, when it came out, caught flames. There were all these descriptions, and then of seeing death and destruction so closely, of having to live in a trench where there were corpses of soldiers who had perhaps fought with them the previous day, of having to march for hours, of being stuck in a wet trench, of not having dry socks for weeks on end. These were simple things maybe, but it really had an impact on the children. The concept of soldiers and war that we have is of sacrifice and nobility. One does not think of the struggles and the difficulty—the simple difficulties of not getting food that you like, or not being able to hear from your family for months, or being homesick. We tried to give the children a sense of these different stories. We also told them that there were many layers to these stories. We do not have all the stories; one set of stories says that the British really looked after the Indian soldiers and there was genuine friendship and camaraderie between the troops. Another set says that there were some Indian soldiers that were so unhappy with their situation that they decided to run away; they deserted their troop and were shot dead when they defected. We tried to give the children a glimpse of these various stories just to make them realize that there are different layers, different kinds of stories and one never has the whole picture.

Based on all these exercises of emotional connection and perspective building, the children wrote letters as if they were soldiers going to war. They also tried to write letters
as a family member waiting for a letter from someone away at war. They then put this together in their group. They read them out to each other and tried to create a collective story which they represented using story boards. We had asked them to use tools that children like to engage with—lots of colourful post-its, doodles, graffiti, all of that. All of these had a very similar theme of the soldier going, of the family waiting, the difficulties for the soldier coming back. I think, for the children, a happy ending was what they always looked for and wanted to portray; they did bring that in and the medals that had been won. It was a way for them to share what they had been thinking.

We then ended this engagement with a lot of discussion around war. We had shared facts, information, we had helped them establish an emotional connect. Now it was important to relate all this to ‘now’. What does war mean today? What are the causes of war? What is the impact of war? Does war exist today? We used poems. There is a blurred version of one here, it is one of the most famous poems related to World War I, and it’s called ‘In Flanders Fields’. It was written by a Canadian doctor, John McCrae, who was posted at Flanders and it was a poem which had inspired the poppy flower to become the symbol of remembrance for World War I. The other poem we read—’Born to Die’, by Simran Gill who writes as a Syrian child on the conflict in Syria. The children read the poems and we asked them to do a comparison. Both poems begin with talk of destruction—the fields have been destroyed, the flowers are dying, and how nature around both places is getting destroyed, and both poems end by saying ‘I am not at peace’—but the reasons for this are very different. In the Flanders poem, the soldier urges his comrades—

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, . . .

In the other poem, the child in Syria says if the war is not ended and if there is no peace, if their land is not saved, then the child will not be at peace.

It was a way of seeing what war can mean to different people. To somebody who is engaged in war and why—what is motivating the soldier to say that, even if he loses his life, victory is most important; and, on the other side, to someone—or, to the child at least—who is suffering due to a war in their country being fought for reasons unknown to them.

We then had discussions around war and peace, and which one the children would choose. Naturally, every child said that they would choose peace. When we did a show of hands, everybody wanted peace. But what does peace mean? Is peace just doves and an olive leaf and the symbols that we create? So, they defined it. Somebody said happiness, somebody said prosperity, somebody said calm, and, eventually, we came to the conclusion that it means handling conflict in peaceful ways. If you are able to handle differences in conflict with understanding, with conversation, with dialogue, then, there is peace in the world. We then related it to our everyday actions. When we choose and do things every day, is each one of them not tending towards war? But, is it a peaceful method or a non-peaceful method that I am choosing? So, we had sheets of paper put up with choices—fairly simple choices—and the children went around thinking about their own lives and their own actions. One of them was being a friend or a bully, another one said hostility or harmony, another, competition or collaboration, and so on. These were words that the children were aware of and which influenced their everyday actions.
We asked them to make certain choices—which they made—and then expressed what they were taking back from this project.

So, over three weeks, that was our school engagement. There were 12 sessions, we worked with about 80 students, about 40 hours of engagement—maybe a little more, field visits for all these three schools. Right now, like I said, the exhibition is under production and we are hoping that by the end of this month we will be able to start taking it to schools across the city where more children will be able to go through the experience of this story.

It is a work in progress. The project is just six months old. We have learnt certain things at this stage based on the challenges that we faced. First—our project grew very organically. We started by finding clues. With each one, we just kept moving, found more contacts, so the circle of people who were giving us answers kept growing. But, we realized that to have identified and contacted the important stakeholders first might have made it a little smoother. We also realized that we needed to get critical information first. But, given that a lot of this information is documented in very different spaces, collecting it has been a challenge. For example, for some of the British regiments, there are no documents related to them with the Indian Army here. Also, some of the units of the Indian Army have now become other units, so there may not be too much documentation on where the original unit was—such things are very difficult to trace.

But, one thing that has helped is the questions that people have asked us: Why World War I? Why do you want to remember the war again and again? What do you think the children will learn from this? Why do you want to tell them about technology from a hundred years ago, when we are in a new technological age? Is it to commemorate and
remember the sacrifice of the soldiers or the injustice that the British did to us? We have been asked all these questions by the various people we have engaged with, and that has helped us revisit our purpose—*Why are we doing this?* What do we want the children to take away from this experience? And we have constantly tried to be clear about that ourselves, that all we want is for the children to have a local connection with something that happened very long ago, to be curious about what happened a hundred years ago, to be equipped with some tools, to be able to find answers to the questions that they have or will have. I think that was, in a nutshell, what we set out to do.

What we hope to do now is engage with many more schools, partner with more individuals and organizations—people from academia, people who have done research in this field, people who have written books, who are working with children around museums and histories—we are hoping to engage with many more people, create an engagement for the public. This was just one way to reach out to three schools and this exhibition will hopefully go to more schools, to the public also. But, we are trying to develop other tools that can engage the public of Bangalore in similar experiences. One example is a mobile treasure hunt. We have mostly done heritage walks in spaces in cities. But when we wanted to create one around the memorials of Bangalore, we realized that one cannot walk to all these places because they are so far away from one another that it will not be possible to cover them on foot. So, I learnt something new—that there is a computer application called Gamify on which you can create a treasure hunt across a city by uploading the clues and mapping the places. We partnered with them, chose five memorials, created the clues and they were able to build a Treasure Hunt. So if you log on to the app, you get the first clue; you go to the first
place, you do it at your own time in your own vehicle and it can be four or ten people or one person—it is up to you. We are hoping to create more such interesting tools, to do similar projects on locally relevant stories. Because, I think, it is a process for children to realize that the city where they live, the buildings that they see every day, the roads that they walk on, days that are important in the city—they all have a connection with something that happened a really long time ago. We hope to do more such projects to make the study of history engaging, exciting and thought-provoking, so that children are able to relate it to where they are right now in their life, in their city.

We have got a lot of help from Leeds University, the National Institute of Design—that is where the exhibition is being created by one of their very talented exhibition-design students who is working with us; the United Service Institution of India—a branch of the armed forces and they have a unit which looks at the armed forces history; one of the military historians, a content advisor who helps us navigate through all this information on the armed forces that we get, and, of course, the three incredible schools we have been working with.

So, this is the Rereeti team, a very small team right now, depending a lot on support and encouragement we get from others in education, in history, in the heritage space. And, this is the adventure that we have embarked on.

**Question-and-Answer Session**

**Audience Member 1.** In our school, we have a heritage club and sometimes we don’t know what to do with them. We do Powerpoint presentations, we take them to the museums, but sometimes it is not enough. So giving them proper purpose to engage with local
history will make it more worthwhile. My question to you is: Are you working in Calcutta?

**Pradhan.** No, not yet. As of now, the exhibition in itself can only travel within the city. But, as it is a travelling exhibition, we hope to take it to other places also. Like I said, we are a small team based in Bangalore, but we are happy to connect virtually with you and see how we can do something together. Having said that, there is a lot that your Heritage Club can probably do in Calcutta because there is so much evidence of British history around—there are monuments, there are stories waiting to be found. I think all you need to do is move out of the classroom and just look for them.

**Audience Member 2.** I have two questions. First, I was wondering whether your organization—since you said that it is still a work in progress and very nascent—has considered tying up with United States’ schools, or maybe, sometime in the future, to tie up with schools globally? After all, you are working on India and particularly Mysore’s connection with World War I. So, it would be interesting to later try and see the local history alongside the global history, and how they are intertwined. So, that’s more of a thought. Second, while undertaking this initiative, could you elaborate on the ways in which you tried to get students to realize the skill set that history as a subject and discipline gives an individual or a community? Unfortunately, there have been so many discussions indirectly about history as a discipline and culture and opportunities and challenges and so on, but one key area we really need to focus on is: Why would people see utility in history besides sheer joy? First of all, there are very few people in the country who would take up humanities by choice and, I think, that is very important, and the initiative you are
doing could play a huge role as you expand to probably link in—what are the skills, the fact that no other subject gives you such a multi-disciplinary perspective to make you a better citizen, a more empathetic human being and so on, and then, of course, by integrating the methodologies and embedding that more in the entire process—be it through oral history, archival work or something more.

Pradhan. Yes, we are trying to connect with other schools in other parts of the country and then, hopefully, outside the country also. What you said about children—what skills and what utility out of this will be realized for the discipline of the subject history—we did not spell it out at the time, but a few things we definitely focused on were: How do you deal with information? When you are looking at the past and you want to find answers, you will go to different sources. One was the multiplicity of sources. Second, when you receive something from a source, how do you ensure verification, accuracy, how do you record that? And then, how does it connect with other sources that you have collected? So, that as a process is something we tried to spell out to the children and we did say that they could use this with other projects of similar nature. Our hope is that the schools that we have engaged with have picked up these tools, templates and skills, and will now be able to apply them into their classes. This is why, I think, now—after yesterday’s and today’s deliberations here—I am realizing or beginning to see the outline of how we can spell them out as skills of the discipline.

Audience Member 3. This is related to the sources. How much of the colloquial or local sources were you able to get and were you able to corroborate with what you got from the British sources, say, from the Maharaja’s
letter which I believe was a translation? Could you connect what you got from your colloquial, local sources to what you got from the British sources?

**Pradhan.** One reason why the scope of this is a little limited right now is that we were able to lay our hands mostly on official sources. So, British—in the sense of cantonment records, at the state archives, in residency records, land records, municipal records—all of which are in English are handwritten, typed and you are able to go and read them. Search records were in English, even records available from the Mysore government. There was a book that they brought out called *Mysore’s Role in the Great War—1914 to 1918.* It was a government publication brought out in 1919, I think, which states everything that the kingdom did for the four years of the war. It is like a report. So, it made life very easy for us because it was at least a good starting point. We also got a lot of administrative records, official correspondence around the setting up of the units, where these units should be placed, especially around the armed forces. The Mysore Imperial Service Troops, the units were actually raised in the late 1800s, much before the war, just for service to the Crown. So, that whole series of correspondence was talking about them. Then again, like the Dusra assembly which happened in the Mysore kingdom, a report was read out there every year like an annual report being presented. The dewan would present it. We did look at two or three sources to verify, but, right now, it is limited to mainly the official sources.

We have tried to find out if there was literature produced at that time in the regional language by poets, novelists, but we have not come across anything that refers to the war very directly yet. And like I said, we
are still struggling with the oral stories and the memories. Out of the 10 people with whom we have now made contact, one is the great-grandson of the commanding officer of the Mysore Imperial Service Troops, Colonel Desraj Urs. We got in touch with the great-grandson and, through him, we are hoping that the royal family will share some letters or memorabilia again. But this is how limited the scope of the written sources is right now. Also the books that have been published in the last couple of years—with the centenary coming up, some incredible books have been published, which teachers could use and some that students can read as well. But, most of them mention troops from the north of India. So, for us, because we were trying to focus on Bangalore and the Mysore state, none of these books have letter extracts by soldiers from the south of India. Of course, it is also in keeping with the British martial races theory, so there were only certain regions that they took most of the troops from, hence, there were more letters from soldiers of those areas. Literacy was also an issue. Many of the soldiers did not write back home because of obvious reasons of illiteracy. So, we have not had too many personal extracts, letters from soldiers of the south. We are still hoping to get more connections. If any of you have a connection with World War I, if anybody in your family was there, please contact us anytime and we’d love to find out more about your connection with the war.

Rishika Mukhopadhyay. I am Rishika, I’m doing my Ph.D. from the University of Exeter. This was very fascinating, the way you included children in this process and, in my mind, it is perhaps what we call the participatory research method. I was wondering, when the children collected data, they presented it and the ideas—whether the idea of the exhibits came from you as an
organization or from them as individuals/independent researcher/groups?

**Pradhan.** Since the data had to be fed into the travelling exhibition, we had to give them certain structures for the exhibits. But, there was freedom for them to create other things. For example, one group at Vidyashilp Academy created a timeline across three charts of the events that happened in the world. We had not asked them to do that, that is how they wanted to present it. What we needed for the exhibition was given as very specific instructions because we were working with limited time and we knew that, to feed into the exhibition, we needed exhibits of a certain kind. But, each of the schools is now hoping that when the exhibitions come to their school, the children, in the meantime, will have worked on presenting their research in other ways and do a display in the school. So, they are also sharing with their classmates, with their seniors, with the others in the school about what they did, and we are hoping that their parents get a chance to come and see the exhibition also, so that the children can tell them what they had done.

**Audience Member 4.** We work with communities, so I could relate very much to this idea of exhibiting wherever we are. What is very empowering is that, in this case, there are academics first, then teachers, then the schoolchildren—all these have become fluid in this project. They were almost like researchers. I wanted to ask: When you encourage them to visit sites, did you, for example, ask them to visit public offices? Municipalities? I have worked in a primary school and tried to do certain things as a substitute teacher because I was the marginalized art teacher. But the thing is that, even a visit to a post office, or taking that walk, it
becomes such an onerous task with permissions and structures in place. Did the teachers also participate in that school?

Pradhan. That was one thing we made very sure of, that the teachers who were a part of the project were also participants. In fact, at Vidyashilp Academy, the whole history department was part of the project. One or two teachers would be associated with a different theme group, they would try and help the children with their research, help them to analyse some of it or express it in certain ways. They came with us on the field trips also.

We could not visit many offices and institutions like you mentioned. We chose memorials because the idea was also to familiarize the children with these historical monuments in the city about which they were not aware. The Munireddy Palya column was about a 10–15 minute walk from the Army Public School where we did the project. When we reached the school on the day of the field trip, they were very excited about where they were going. We simply told them to start walking—we did not tell them where we were going. We began walking and, as we approached, they were actually disappointed: ‘This? This is what you brought us to see? We see it every day!’ Then, when we told them the story, they were most astounded. They had not known it was hundred years old or why it had been built. And then there were further questions.

So, for the purpose of this project, we chose specific memorials. Most of them were in public spaces—two in the middle of roads, one in a park, one in the school. We also got them to think about why the memorial was in that space. What did it mean in the space? Would it have been better to have a memorial
in a different space? Why was it a column? Why was it a soldier? We had a lot of discussions around what memorials are and this need of ours to commemorate. The need to mark memory and how did that start and why was it needed and why did it change after World War I, when, for the first time, there were mass casualties and people dying away from their homelands. So, their families needed something to mark and somewhere to go to grieve. All of these stories got linked to these field visits.

But, yes, when we drove around to some of these central Bangalore areas which were cantonment areas earlier—the children knew M G Road, Brigade Road—but they did not know the stories behind these names—why was it called ‘Infantry Road’ or which was the first church in the cantonments. So, we were able to point these out to them. St. Joseph’s School’s boys have a memorial in their school which they know of but they have never stopped and read the names. Then, they read these accounts from the magazines and the story fit. That name that they see there, they could put in a context and a geographical space at a particular time—‘he went to Mesopotamia and this is what he did’ and so on. We were trying to get them to piece these clues together and try and see what they could build out of that. The teachers helped get all the permissions and the bus and other technicalities—that we did not have to get into, and that was a huge help.

**Audience Member 5.** Museums all over the world are being questioned for this. You talked about exhibition making and museum making. This is essentially a ‘war’ museum. So, have you considered if this is going to be another war museum or a war exhibition for peace?

**Pradhan.** In fact, around the exhibition also, what we are
trying to present is some of the discussions that the children had. When they spoke about courage and responsibility, what it meant for the soldier, the children we worked with made lists of actions that define courage for us today. What does it mean for me to be courageous? The children wrote things like ‘going and talking to the principal’, or ‘admitting a mistake’. So, some of these will be interactive points in the exhibition also, relating that hundred-year-old event and those stories and facts to our ‘now’. How this information is relevant to our now is also what we are including in the exhibition.

Neha Pradhan Arora is an educator who has been working with schools and communities for the creation of meaningful and engaging learning experiences.

Rereeti works towards revitalizing museums and heritage sites and making them more relevant to students, families and local communities.

Images courtesy: Rereeti
I hope that the material I present will provide a few ideas for how archives can be linked with history in the classroom. To briefly introduce myself: I trained in filmmaking, and then in visual anthropology, and I’ll draw links between visual and material culture and archives as part of my presentation. I would also like to thank Sudeshna for setting the stage by speaking about institutional archives and collections—ordering, collection management, dissemination of collections and display as well as engagement with the community. In my presentation, I am going to shift from institutional archives to individuals working with archives, and how we position ourselves vis-à-vis these institutional archives?

To begin, a few questions and concerns: Why does one collect? If we forget words like archive and museum and collections, what is it that makes us interested in things? I grew up collecting stamps—what did it do to me? What was the sense of history or the sense of ownership or engagement I developed? What is the kind of scholarship and methodology that we bring to this activity, based on our interest? Sudeshna spoke about it briefly, but we have
to be very careful about it even when we work not only with tangible objects but also with ideas. After all, an archive is also an archive of ideas. What happens when an individual interacts with them? How does our imagination and engagement/s re-or de-historicize? Sometimes, it might be even better to look at things out of context. Not always, but sometimes. The most important thing—when it comes to culture—is the gaze: how are we looking at the material and what is the voice, or what are the multiple voices, that we are trying to hear and how do we understand from them?

I was very fortunate to work on a non-fiction feature film called Seven Islands and a Metro, on the city of Bombay by Madhusree Dutta. When I joined the project, about 80 per cent of the film had been shot over the past three years and I was supposed to shoot the remaining 20 per cent and then handle post-production. What is very interesting is that, even as we were shooting the film, there was an acute understanding that we were not shooting only for this film but simultaneously developing an archive of oral narratives within the city of Bombay, which is why the interviews were structured in a particular way. Here is one of the posters of the film, designed by me:
In the background is bamboo scaffolding, a very telling moment of the conditions of the South Asian cities. So, the idea of construction is the background for the idea of writing on the city; *tales from Bom Bahia, Bombay or Mumbai*, building an archive of oral narratives of Bombay—the transition in the city. What are these voices? Why are these voices important? Why is it important to give a platform to these voices? Why was a public archive required?

Apart from the institutional archives, for audiovisual media there are corporate archives. Even though we have the Internet now, a lot of material is getting more and more cloistered, manipulated and guarded. Further: How can we use video and documentary practice, not only as a way of engaging with community but also with the purpose of creating an archive with multiple layers of annotations? Because, as we said, depending on what you hear, what your understanding of the context is, multiple readings are possible. And it is very important to be able to put it all together in a certain way. The idea of *Padma*, and a sizeable part of the content on it, emerged from here. Somewhere, we started with a large number of DV tapes which had to be logged for the post-production of the film. It’s the best learning that I could have ever had on the city of Bombay because I went through hundreds of hours of footage covering interviews of hundreds of people. How was the footage going to be organized? There is a lot of material on the site from multiple sources. What are the projects which these rushes are linked with? What are the topics that are covered? Who are the people involved in creating those rushes? And then, finally, key words and themes that have been addressed. These were extremely important considerations.

A large part of this archive then became the source for *Project Cinema City*—where they were transformed into
art projects. An artwork I had done for it—part of *The Calendar Project*—had a very interesting premise: through art practice, we try to recreate a certain histories of the city of Bombay, retroactively, and create calendars for each year. There were a number of senior artists who were invited to create these calendars and this is the calendar I made for Liberty Theatre. In 1949, Liberty Theatre was opened in Bombay, one of the first really plush cinema halls for showing Indian cinema. We very consciously featured the film *Andaz* to draw out the ideas that we wanted to plant into the history of this theatre. This is not about historical accuracy, though. There was a nationalist moment there, the idea that Indian films could also be seen in this kind of theatre with its beautiful art-deco architecture and air-conditioning.

From 2010, I have been engaged in documenting architecture and material culture around Islam in the western Himalayas. While there was continuity in methodology from the projects in Bombay, there was a huge dearth of material around Islam in that region. Because when we imagine Ladakh, we don’t think of Islam. We think that
Islam is in Kashmir and Ladakh is entirely Buddhist—and that’s not true. I went from village to village and documented the spaces, the objects, the architecture, and built a database. The South Asia Institute at the University of Heidelberg facilitated by Tasveer Ghar had offered a fellowship which helped formalize this process over a period of two years and archive the material on Heidicon. An example: this is an old Tibetan-style mosque in Chuchot Gongma, around 300-years old. Nowadays these are all being reconstructed in concrete. There are in-depth notes and annotations that we were able to do for each of these images on the site.

The Khanqah and Imambara at Chochot Gongma, Abeer Gupta from HeidIcon

The notes cover architecture and its transformations. The photographic documentation was followed by an essay, which is available online along with videos and images. Subsequently, I got a grant from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences to conduct interviews of people. There were almost about a hundred hours of interviews. There is a trailer of the project on the School of Media and Cultural Studies page. The current issue of Marg, The Draw of the Hills has another article that I subsequently wrote based on the more recent work on the same subject.
Moving on, I want to return to an artwork on Kashmir which is part of the Calendar Project. We wanted to do something on the Agfa, the first point-and-shoot cameras. It was a historical moment, especially in the Valley, because this Valley was not being shot only by photographers but also by amateurs, tourists. Our aim was to juxtapose various kinds of images that have been created that then become classic stereotype images of Kashmir. We took lines from the actual advertisements that Agfa and Kodak were bringing out at that point of time. We then settled on this tagline which said ‘Agfa makes you feel like a star too’.

The idea was to use archival images as part of the artwork. So, for instance, there is an image from the Mahata archives. Then we included an image of one of my friends who had travelled there in the early 1980s as a child and was photographed wearing a pheran. But the real reason I am showing you this project is because something I did in 2012 resulted in another project for the Singapore Bienalle in 2016 when I created an installation of photographs and objects of material culture. On the wall we displayed...
photographs from the Mahata archives of men, women and children wearing pherans and in the foreground we were able to display some of these pherans made from various materials—velvet, wool, a sort of cheap commercial chiffon a lighter material that is worn in the summer; the kind of staple colours that are used; the various kinds of embroideries practised—to create a tactile experience of this object within that space.

I will conclude by recounting another project in Ladakh. In 2016–17, I received a Fellowship from the India Foundation for the Arts to engage with a collection at the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalya (IGRMS). I was very keen to explore their collection of objects from the Himalayas. I wanted to engage with a number of artists from Ladakh and have them interpret and draw stories around the objects we selected. For instance, how do we deal with the political re-drawing of borders, issues around migration, refugees and nation-states? How do we bring in all these histories into the way that we curate and narrativize these spaces?

We selected three groups of objects from the region. The first is a cape, called a bogh, worn around the shoulder.
The second is a set of flasks—it is a kettle—called a *tibril* and a *melang* and it is in two parts. There is a part on top that has the tea and the bottom holds the coal which keeps the sweet or buttered tea warm. The third is a pair of shoes—the *paabu* and the *lapul*. In Ladakh these are very significant objects because they traditionally came out of recycling every kind of material available in the region. So, the leftover *nambu*—locally woven wool from the *gonchas*, the long woollen clothes—would be used, the leftover leather from the musical instruments, leftover threads that came out of other things. We wanted to draw out all these stories in some way.

We started with a photo documentation of these objects across Ladakh and we tried to look at how they have evolved historically, from animal skin to the first single or dual-coloured *bogh* you see in Changtang. We were also trying to evoke ideas of how this object becomes more than just an item of clothing—so you see the *Chang pas*, nomadic ladies carrying their babies in them. You see a whole range of brocades—Muslim brides in Ladakh who wear *boghs* made from brocades from Banaras. Then there are *changpas* which because of their proximity to Kinnaur, their weaving has a lot of similarities with the Kinnauri shawls that you might have seen. There is the *thigma*, the local tie-and-dye process. A photo of an old lady from Turktuk who is wearing a shawl but has draped it like a *bogh*. We were trying to map all these variations. The range includes what is perhaps familiar to us and has extended itself into the contemporary aesthetics of the *bogh*, the *kinari* work—cheap embroidery one sees in markets such as Karol Bagh or Lajpat Nagar.

We then mapped out the kettle, in its variations: its interpretation in local pottery in aluminium, as it became an industrialized product but then also how its use has transformed with the advent of the thermos flasks. With the coming of the thermos flask, these objects were no longer
required—you no longer needed a fire at the bottom to keep it warm. So the last part in this transformation is into a ceremonial or ritual object.

With the shoes, we mapped out all the different layers of materials being used, from leftover *thigma* to a lot of jute bags which were up-cycled to construct the soles. In the middle of the twentieth century, there were the transformations that started coming in with the presence of the military and Indian civil servants. Ladakh being a popular trekking and adventure-tourism site, there has always been a market for cheap adventure gear—along with warm clothes and shoes, such as the fake Ugg boots in circulation there. We mapped all that out and tried to understand what was really happening there.

This image is to give you a sense of the display. The images were created by Gulzar, a photographer, and Chemat, a sculptor, who collaborated with me. We displayed the objects and the images next to each other. Chemat has been working with the idea of the spindle which symbolizes the core of the idea of textiles, which materialized in *Mother Spindle*, where the process and research become a part of the artwork, the male and female spindles—the men
and women use different kinds of spindles, the raw wool, the yarn, the woven cloth and then the idea of all these colours merging into the culture of Ladakh.

The other installations were inspired from the shoe and the kettle. While the outside was embellished by all these different brands and motifs from the shoes and kettles, the inside had screens displaying the documentation of its making and circulation. He had done an artwork while he was in college, called *Welcome to Ladakh*. It was a morph of the kettle, shoe and the hat—the traditional wear of the Ladakhis to welcome a special guest or royalty. We took that structure and we literally broke it in half—we said we’d split this sculpture open, and, inside it, plant the collection of narratives that evolved out of our research. The space for the show was a *chansa*, a small kitchen which is part of the outdoor museum at the IGRMS. We used the inside of that kitchen and refashioned it for our purpose. We displayed the textile and the shoes on one side, and the material objects—the kettles and the flasks—on the other.

I began with a few thoughts that I try to keep in mind whenever I engage in these kinds of projects, I will end with some that emerged from these engagements. How can
objects and art practice become a site for preserving memory—certain histories? I felt that Chemat’s artworks did not just derive from the object but also from his understanding of it. I will end with a short story. In the textile installation, many have wondered what that form is. A lot of people say that it is a head of a deer, but it is in fact a spindle with the yarn woven around it. For him, the spindle is something linked to motherhood and feminine force. In the past, spinning and weaving were considered essential skills for a girl in Ladakh. What would her child wear? It was not a luxury, it was essential. And the first story he told me that inspired that papier mâché sculpture was: once when he was back home he saw a young lady in an advanced stage of pregnancy. And she was learning how to spin because, nowadays, no one spins. And she was doing a rather horrible job of it because her spindle was not very uniform! He sat there and saw her struggling. When amateurs try to use the spindle, they can’t do it as skillfully: the thread keeps spinning over. She was getting very embarrassed and kept doing and redoing it. So this sculpture was inspired by that story of his. It was about him drawing such stories into his art practice and then making it a part of this narrative. I think I will just end here and I hope you have some questions.
1 https://sites.google.com/site/7islandsfilm/filmdetails
2 https://pad.ma/grid/title/7_islands_and_a_metro&project==
   7_Islands_And_A_Metro
3 http://projectcinemacity.com/
4 https://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/search
5 https://kjc-sv033.kjc.uni-heidelberg.de/essay-
detail.php?eid=10
6 http://smcs.tiss.edu/films/old-routes-new-journeys/
7 http://projectcinemacity.com/artwork/the-calendar-project/
8 https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-
   %C2%AD%E2%80%90pheran/IQFiuHiie_ERPg
9 http://indiaifa.org/events/ifabhopal-old-routes-new-
   journeys-ii-abeer-gupta-making-home-rathin-barman-igrms-
   opening
**Question-and-Answer Session**

**Audience Member 1.** I am a student of cultural studies and philosophy. Your presentation was partly a relief for me because my experience with the more eminent universities here has been a certain kind of resistance to inter-disciplinarity. What I see in the kind of archiving you are doing is that apart from the history and anthropology, it accommodates the kind of hermeneutic and critical strands of humanities. In the sense that you do work with interpretation, you do work with producing meanings and that, I think, is very crucial. Because it is the tradition of argument that the humanities have always been engaged with. So, I just wanted to know what your experience has been while interacting with universities and institutions.

**Gupta.** I am more interested in the individual. It’s very easy for us to be critical of institutions, I worked in a university in Delhi and there are various pushes and pulls that determine things. My experience has been derived from individuals. I have, for instance, interacted with the University of Heidelberg through one or two people who facilitated a project and created an opportunity. Somebody’s interest in the South Asia Institute to document peripheral practices around Islam triggered this project. But a lot of universities, both in India and abroad, are developing projects like these. It depends on people and individual imaginations and their striving towards making something happen. But, yes, the awareness is definitely growing and one of the reasons why we planned this session was because we need to look at them more critically.

One of the biggest problems of working with oral narratives is that they can be very misleading as well. Those of us who are familiar with the South Asian
experience, we know that it is extremely fractured, tor-
mented, it is extremely painful. We must remember that 
the act of forgetting is also sometimes a very conscious 
act. Sometimes people don’t want to remember certain 
things—you might have read something in a book and 
asked somebody about it, and they replied by saying it 
ever happened. But what does that mean? Does it 
mean that it didn’t happen? Or does it mean that they 
don’t wish to talk about it? I have not gone too much 
into Kashmir, but these are complex issues and a 
university as an institution may or may not be able to 
deal with it. But it is to do with individuals, to deter-
mine the path, the ethics and bring about the right kind 
of connections and make it happen.

Sulakshana de Mel. I am an anthropologist currently 
working on a memory, cultural and historical dialogue 
initiative in Sri Lanka which is looking at dealing with 
the past and, more narrowly, looking at the war and 
dealing with that past. Something we are struggling 
with right now in our work is the ethics of memory 
culture. So I’d appreciate if you could tell us a little 
about how you managed or what were the challenges 
you encountered in balancing that fine line between 
creating visibility for a marginal community vis-à-vis 
the danger of exoticizing it.

Gupta. That is a complex one. I have been very fortunate 
because I have also been teaching throughout the same 
period. I had the rare opportunity of interacting with 
young people (as mediators) with whom I have been 
able to develop an understanding over the last 10 or 12 
years and with whom I can now collaborate. I have 
been aware that sometimes we take too much respon-
sibility on our own shoulders. Sometimes it’s better to 
just offload that. One of the reasons I decided to show 
the Ladakh project, the one that I did with Chemat, is
that, at the end of the day, you can make your point of view as clear and transparent and as understandable to your collaborators and let them take it forward. Gulzar and Chemat have developed an understanding, over a period of time, what Abeer stands for, what his politics are, what he is looking for. Equally I too have had the luxury of getting to know nuances and when we discuss a project, we discuss the contours of that project rather than the content. As Anand mentioned on the first day, one of the essential parts of being an anthropologist is to just ‘hangout.’ Because the people need to be able to trust you, they need to be able to know you enough to be able to entrust you with their idea and build a dialogue over a period of time before we can even begin a project like this. I don’t know if I have been able to answer your question. It is a really tough one, but that is just one of the ways I have tried to work around it.

Audience Member 2. I come from Birla High School and we have a heritage club. Our children make small movies on artefacts and they are very inspired about this. I would just like to know: When did you start? What was the inspiration and how did you go about making these films? Was it school from where the inspirations came? My second question: Do you also do comparatives in cultures? Do you find something in Ladakh that is similar to something in another culture? Because, in the end, everything—all cultures—are unified by certain values.

Gupta. The inspiration: Well, growing up in Calcutta, I don’t think I had a choice but to become a film buff, to want to become a filmmaker. But going off and studying filmmaking, that was the easy part. How to press the record button is not very complicated, but what do you record? That’s the biggest calamity we are
fighting now—that it is so easy to press the record button. Fifteen years ago, you’d have to wait for months before you even saw a camera. Now, everybody has a camera. What that does to recording itself is another crisis we need to address at some point. But let’s put that aside for now. So, yes, my initial involvement was through documentary practice that I started with in my presentation. I entered, or rather my explorations began, with documentary and I was very fortunate that I was working with people like Madhu and various others in Bombay. We were very conscious that we were not just making these recordings for a film—we had that broader agenda. So, that could be the methodological ‘turn’ in filmmaking. Because a lot of people still look at filmmaking as a means to an end: you shoot, you edit, you make a film—and you’re done. But we said: if we are engaging with documentary, it is not just about making a film and taking it around the world. Of course, that is important but let us also try and develop databases.

This shift I talked about when I moved to Ladakh—that, when one started working with Islam in Ladakh, one did not have a database to work with. There were a handful of scholars who had written about Islam in that region. So we got together and discussed it. The respondents were 84, 85, someone was 89, someone was 92. There was a gentleman in the film from Hunder, teaching in a school in Leh. He was 20 years old in 1947. More than just having the meetings for myself, I wanted to save these interviews so that later generations can watch. Thankfully, he is still around. So, I don’t know if I have answered your inspiration question, but that’s how I navigated my way.

Coming to the second part, the comparison part: during my stay in Kashmir, when we were looking at
images for the calendar, when we were collecting images of various kinds of *pherans*, we realized that from Turkey to Tibet, all these garments have the same cut. It only changes in size and the way it is worn. The Ladakhi *goncha* is constructed in exactly the same way. It is just that the material is thicker and longer and made loose so that it can be tied up at the back with what is called *askeryaks*, (a cloth belt) to create more layering.

When you are working with culture, it is extremely important to be able to look at patterns and ranges. When we talk about ordering—one essential aspect is to look at how the patterns spread and what kind of range things exist in. The coppersmiths of Ladakh were actually Newaris whom the Namgyal kings invited over in the sixteenth/seventeenth centuries gave them a village and had them settle there. Now that history itself is something they may not talk about any longer—they will say ‘we are Ladakhis’. But that history is important for us to know because Nepal was where this superbly fine copper work was happening. This tradition is drawn from there.

Another example: there is a kind of relief work being done on the pottery. It’s freehand pottery, it is not made on a wheel and there is relief work on it. We realized that this is an example of pottery influenced by the metal ware, because this relief work was being done on the metal work. In conversation with an archaeologist working in Ladakh and in Afghanistan, we realized that this is a unique product that is only seen here where it has been directly influenced by the relief work done on the metal pots. And that is one of the inferences that we drew from this kind of comparative exercise.
Padmini Ray Murray. I work at Srishti, Bangalore. To Anjum, what you were saying about excellent cataloguing: there is a very easy to use cataloguing application called OMEKA. And I completely agree with what Abeer was saying that, in order to learn about the collection, one of the best things you can do is to annotate it. And this is something that school teachers all over the world have been using. So it’s definitely worth taking a look at. In answer to our young friend who said that interdisciplinarity is unfamiliar at Indian universities, you might want to talk to Jadavpur, to Srishti, to TISS. But my question to you Abeer is, I work on—and I have been recently writing about—critiques of Google Cultural Institute, and I noticed that your work features there as a part of the Singapore Bienalle. What I have been writing about is the politics of representation when it is mediated through the digital. But, of course, it also arises from what is given as information to machines. What I am a little confused about is that when you are saying your friendships with people who you are representing allows you to represent their work, what does it mean in terms of them being recognized as artists? Because it is still your name, Abeer Gupta, on the Singapore Bienalle. So are you photographing and documenting the work of a community and are you the artist? And when you are talking about the pherans, I don’t know if there are allusions to who has made them. So I am wondering about the layers. Because when you are talking about documenting an object, who creates the object is as significant as who is documenting it and who gets recognized for that. And in academic circles, or even in culture circles, recognition is definitely something that works. Recognition means tenure, for example. But to be very frank, when we work with communities that are less fortunate, it’s
money that works, or recognition that will then get them money. So, what I am saying is: once you move away from that space, what happens? Also what you said about drinking and partying, and I love this—ethnography as advanced ‘hanging out’. I think there definitely is a space for that, but that can’t be done with everybody. Gender is a huge issue here. So if you wanted to work with women who make *pherans*, how would that work?

Gupta. One of the things that has inadvertently been part of my practice is the constant interaction with artists, artisans, craft persons. Having studied at NID, we grow up very close to weavers and craftsmen. Your scepticism is quite to-the-point. To clarify the information part of it: I don’t know whether Google Cultural Institute actually represents all the information on the page. But the catalogue has descriptions of where those clothes were loaned from—a lot of them were old pieces which were finally returned to the people I had borrowed them from. And in the catalogue we made an effort to make a note of whom I had loaned what from and a description of the material, approximately the date. So if you go back to the first slide, when I speak of acquisition, that itself becomes a part of how I describe my work. Because acquisition or provenance itself is so contested. And as an individual that is something we must confront. Because we don’t have the luxury of taking something away and saying ‘we just found it’.

Another example I spoke about is Chemat’s and Gulzar’s names. So, for instance, IFA just wrote to me, they want to use one of the images on their calendar. I told them exactly what to write as a title for it: *Mother Spindle*, Chemat Dorje, papier mâché, wool, 2017. We know that a lot of artists even today, including a lot of
very senior artists, are doing artwork where the younger artists and craftsmen and artisans working in their studios are helping them produce it. But it has also become like design, it has become a label. With digital technology, one of the things we can do is connect people. I am just the facilitator which is why I ended the first slide with the idea of curation. You know, the gaze and the voice and the representation of it. It is extremely important because, for a long time we haven’t thought of giving it. Now, I think, it is really time that we allow these voices to come out. They are my students, they are my friends, they are dearer to me than anyone else. I am just saying that it might sound like I am drawing too much from personal relationships, but it’s not so. That itself becomes part of the process.

**Murray.** It is worth talking about because that is one of the biggest issues we face today.

**Gupta.** Absolutely. This project was recently presented at the International Congress of Ethnography and IUAES, Brazil, part of a panel called ‘Artist, Artisanal Agency in the Periphery’. Sudeshna mentioned Michael Herzfeld in her presentation—that’s one of the texts that I draw a lot from. Finbarr Flood, whom you mentioned, is an inspiration for this project.

**Sukanya Mitra.** I teach history. I am obviously interested in archives because I am a historian. And since your presentation shifts from the institution to the individual, I wanted to ask you: archives are repositories of memory, but they are also repositories of knowledge, and, as we know, knowledge also has a link with power. So what are your thoughts on that? And when you are talking about establishing relationships with your collaborators, you are lucky you are an artist and whoever
you collaborated with are also artists. But what happens when, for example, I work with hawkers? They had an archive of their own and I faced a lot of problems dealing with them. First, because of my gender. And second, because many of them didn’t really understand what I was trying to do. Because I was a historian, they couldn’t understand why I would speak to them. So, this concept of power along with the idea that if the person with whom you are trying to build a relationship doesn’t really understand the kind of work you are trying to do, then how do you build that relationship?

Gupta. The answer is education, which is why we are here. The next answer is that the very fact that we are acknowledging that there is a power equation in the process is a good beginning. If we can acknowledge the individual and, as I said earlier to Padmini, wear it on our sleeves and be conscious about it, it will automatically become a part of a process.

The gap that you face is a tangible gap. We’ve all faced it. But that becomes our responsibility. Last year in Bangalore, I had spoken about an education project that I am running in Ladakh, where all these artists are working with me and we are developing school curriculum around heritage. We have to often take on multiple roles and try and become facilitators of this change. I know it’s very easy for me to go to Ladakh and say, ‘Oh, you can’t, you don’t understand.’ But then, whose problem is that? If it is my problem, if I need them to understand, then I will have to sit down with them for 10 years and bring them to a point where they can understand. Chemat was part of a workshop we did to inaugurate the Ladakh Art and Media Organization (LAMO). I worked with him for an entire year in 2010, and, at that point of time, he was in the first
year of BFA and had just come from Jammu and started doing his workshop with us. In the last 5 years, he has completed his BFA and MFA; he had his first solo show in Delhi. There is a group of people whom you should Google: ‘The Progressive Artists of Ladakh’. They have a Facebook page, there is a growing community. Over the last 8 years, LAMO has been doing an annual summer art camp and an autumn art camp. As a result, there are more people who want to study art, there are more people who want to study fine art and design. More will happen. Slowly, but it’ll happen. Like I said, what is important is acknowledging that there is a power equation, acknowledging that these are issues that have not been looked into before, acknowledging the gap and trying to work at it. It will not solve itself tomorrow, but it will solve itself over a period of time, and this is the hope that we continue to work with everyday—the hope that we take with us when we go back to the field.

When I started working on the idea of the Conflictorium, I never thought that I’d be speaking at a history conference. Although, I think, the crux of what we are dealing with is very much history. I will talk about the Conflictorium in some detail, but I also want to attempt an auto-ethnography in the beginning.

Today I am going to speak from three positions. The first: as someone who grew up in Ahmedabad city, someone who was 12 years old when the 2002 riots happened and, therefore, rendered a witness for the rest of her life. The second: as a dancer, a performer—in some senses, a cultural practitioner. But as a cultural practitioner for whom, growing up in Ahmedabad city, not much opportunity was available. There was a lot of infrastructure in Ahmedabad per se, several institutions of excellence which have been so for many years. But they were not available until you had certain cultural capital. The third position, probably the more critical position, is as someone who is trained in design but was interested in moving away from the problem–solution framework that, until a couple of years ago, was imagined
to be the primary purpose of design. Maybe that is changing now. So those are the three positions that I am going to speak from today.

For those of you who are familiar with Ahmedabad, the Sabarmati—now more like a canal because of the river-front project—runs through the centre of the city, dividing it into two parts but not two equal parts. There are binaries of several kinds—there are binaries of economics, of minority and majority, of the old city and the new city, of what the imagination of justice and its absence is across these two parts, and which kinds of histories these two different sides believe is their heritage. I am using the word ‘heritage’ very consciously because we are embroiled in this euphoria of being called a ‘World Heritage City’, the first Heritage City in the country, etc. Where I work at the moment is in the old part of the city, in an area called Mirzapur. It takes about 23 to 27 seconds every morning to cross the river using one of the several bridges. And in those 27 seconds, on the Ellis Bridge to be precise, worldviews change, paradigms shift, landscapes morph, languages transform, rules of how you relate to people are renegotiated. And those 27 seconds—twice a day—push you to occupy very uncomfortable positions while you are either in the old city or in the new city, none of which become comfortable again.

In Mirzapur, there lived a lady called Bachu Nagarwala. She was a Parsi woman. She never married, she never had children, she died at the age of 92—and she lived in a mansion which she decided she would donate. She didn’t know for what, but she knew for something good.

I discovered her story much later—I never met her. I only met her through the house that she lived in and the objects in that house. She was Ahmedabad city’s first trained hairstylist. In 1942, she went to Bombay and came back with a certificate in hairstyling. There is a particular class
and age of women in Ahmedabad who have all been at least once to Bachuben Nagarwala’s house to get their hair cut. They might have liked it or not because of who she was—very, very strict about keeping appointments, etc.—but a lot of people in at least one part of the city were aware of that building. In 2012, I was just finishing studying design at Srishti School of Art, Design & Technology in Bangalore and thinking of a diploma project. I was interested in working with space, in particular, and I was certain I wanted to come back to Ahmedabad. Because while I was at design school, I was a very angry student—I was angry about everybody wanting to do graphic design or product design or automobile design. I think being a witness makes you angry, keeps you angry, even after ten years. I decided I would go back to Ahmedabad and find a project, so I could do something about this anger, maybe find a temporary resolution.

I was directed to this building donated by Bachuben Nagarwala to an organization called Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) that has been working in Gujarat and four other
states, for access to justice. They’ve been donated this building and have been using it as a sort of storeroom for case files. It was a fairly dilapidated building. Mirzapur in particular has had a notorious reputation for a long time, so much so that it comes under the ‘Disturbed Areas Act’ in Ahmedabad. Which means that the Rapid Action Force is very often present. This is the prerequisite condition before the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) can be brought into effect.

One entered the building almost with a feeling of entering a house of wonders. It had acquired an afterlife even when she was alive. She used to live on the first floor and she barely had any family or relatives except maybe a wellwisher or friend who lived close by. As she grew old and weak, she was taken care of by a caretaker who, over time, sold off her belongings. But this building also started being used as a place to consume illegal alcohol brewed behind it; it was rented out by the hour to sex workers to ply their trade, and other things like that. We discovered a truckload of *thailes* or *kotharees*, as we call them in Gujarati—little pouches in which alcohol is packaged. And condoms too. We also found, among video reels of the Mahabharata television series, the tools she used in her salon. And a whole bunch of objects you would find in any home at any point of time—cassettes, bedsheets and vessels, everyday objects. That was the moment. It was overwhelming, but the question was: What does one do with this building? There is, of course, the work of 25–30 years that Centre for Social Justice and other allied organizations such as Janvikas and Navsarjan have been doing. And they are the people who are supporting it. So, the backbone of this project was set in place by civil society, in some sense. But I was also a ‘civil society baby’—my parents were people who worked with NGOs, my entire environment consisted
of people working in the development sector. There was something I intuitively wanted to respond to in terms of the methods being used by them, and I didn’t have any way of qualifying why I was critiquing this or the language.

We started working on this building and, in about nine months’ time, we fixed it. But while we were fixing the building, we had to be at the building continuously. And you cannot just be at the building—you are within the building, you are without the building, you are outside and inside. And then it is no longer just the building but also where the building is located. Within a 500-metre radius of that building live the Devi Pujak community, the Muslims and the community that does manual scavenging work. We were squeezed between the Chalte Peer Ki Dargah, the Sai Baba Temple and the CNI church. The District Court is down the road and the first Technical College right in front.

We are physically located in the middle of, you may say, diversity—but you may also say difference. Or if one really wants to acknowledge it for what it is, then in the middle of aggression, the tipping point. It takes very little for a small brawl in this part of Mirzapur to become a stone-pelting event and then escalate into something that needs the army to come in. It can hit that range in about 30 minutes, after somebody hits a cycle with a scooter! We were trying to understand what this neighbourhood was really about on the one hand, and what these organizations had been doing on the other. One way of understanding this was that we were in the middle of conflict. Conflict was a term—an idea rather—that felt like it encompassed the nuances of all that was going on. Not only in Mirzapur but also what underlay Ahmedabad as a city and Gujarat as a state. We knew only too well that Gujarat was a laboratory of a certain kind of political work that would certainly then be replicated on a large scale outside. One was aware in
2012/13 of what was coming. So keeping all that in mind, it seemed that conflict as a category would allow us to have several conversations.

The framework used for putting the space together was that you would enter it, you would touch and feel, look and read. It was essentially driven by a somatic, tactile experience: by entering the building, you were going to be entering the realm of emotion, of feeling, maybe of transformation, of reflection. To bring it back to a 2-dimensional space is going to be difficult, but I am going to try it listing the kinds of installations that there are in the building.

The first is the Conflict Timeline. One of the questions that often came up in early brainstorming sessions with all kinds of people, with college students, with children in the neighbourhood, with members of civil society, with academics, was: ‘Why are you creating a museum of conflict?’ For two reasons: One, we are in the state of Gandhi, the state of non-violence and, therefore the state ‘where conflict does not happen.’ That’s been the over-arching perception of Gujarat—there is very little acknowledgement that violence exists. 2002 is imagined as an aberration for this largely peaceful state. This, of course, we know is not true. Two, as an answer to another question we often faced: ‘Why are you creating a museum at all?’ There are approximately 30 museums in Ahmedabad city alone, with an abysmal average footfall in each. If you take out the Swaminarayan Mandir Museum, then the footfall is below the hundreds—annually. So, why one more museum?

We had to answer both these questions to go ahead with the project. The issue of conflict in Gujarat was answered easily through the timeline itself. The state of Gujarat was separated from the Bombay Presidency in 1960. Its formation, simply put, was a result of a linguistic conflict,
one among many undercurrents. And there were many more such conflicts to bring back to active memory. With the idea of the museum itself we were being ambitious, we were thinking maybe we could think through what the museum as an idea has stood for and whether we could open up those definitions and those meanings and implications a little bit when we attempted this project, this Museum of Conflict. Therefore, a question you might want to ask later is: ‘Why won’t you just call yourself a Centre for Conflict through the Arts?’ or something like that. About why the museum as a category became important for us to work with. Needless to say, museums in India have largely been state-run and, therefore, generating knowledge of the past has been the domain of the State. Legitimizing particular historical narratives has therefore been one of the functions of the state-run museums. And that, at least in Gujarat within that laboratory framework, became such a frightening idea that one could not ignore that the idea of the museum was what we had to start working with.

One of the galleries in this museum is called the Gallery of Disputes. While the timeline is more anecdotal, this is more conceptual, and it opens up the conflict around gender, caste, labour, the media, by personifying the animal world. When we were talking to young people about the validity of such an idea, one phrase that was used very often was: ‘Why are you raising the dead from the grave?’ We realized that the moment there is a tone of accusation, or a feeling of being implicated, there is a shutdown mechanism that comes into play. But we still wanted to talk, we still wanted to generate dialogue. So we said maybe if we translate some of these ideas into the animal world, we can achieve a safe space. This was more a strategy than a curatorial decision—and I am looking towards the schoolteachers at this moment—a strategy just to begin a conversation around some of these very charged, tension-creating ideas.
There is a room right after the Gallery of Disputes called the Empathy Alley which attempts a very simple idea: it looks at the nation and at the thought-leaders involved in the process of nation-building. And it highlights the fact that there were differences while this nation was coming together, while it was being built. There wasn’t one fixed way in which people were thinking about the Constitution either. But what are these fault lines? Or how do these fault lines translate into where we are standing today?

So, while we are walking through the gallery, children are involved in the exercise of identifying who is who in terms of simple silhouettes. Some of these silhouettes also have audio features—the speeches made by them. In this room, standing opposite Nehru is Jinnah, and one of the fault lines is between Nehru and Jinnah. Of course, the children do not recognize Jinnah’s silhouette, but I realized that the ability to recognize Ambedkar is also really low. The silhouette of Babasaheb Ambedkar is the classic silhouette with one finger pointing forward. Many children have identified him as the present prime minister in the recent past.

We move to the next room which, in effect, hosts the Constitution—an exact replica on a pedestal. Every now and then, we curate laws from the Constitution and highlight them through panels. We have in the past highlighted laws pertaining to untouchability, gender, forest rights, etc. Let me share an anecdote: Of course, there are a lot of questions and answers when children come and walk through the galleries. One of the questions I ask is, ‘What is this book on the pedestal?’ And the response invariably depends on what religious group the child belongs to. It automatically becomes either this book or that. The imagination we are bound today as citizens is derived from the Constitution. The consciousness that our Indianness lies in
a constitutional morality is absolutely absent. A lot of the children hear the word *Samvidhaan* for the first time in this room. By the time you have walked past the Constitution, it seems like conflict is a distant thing. Rather, it’s about countries, it’s about time that has passed and that’s when you come to the next room which is called the Memory Lab.

There are simple pickle jars with little tags, and the tags read—date, object name, story. That’s it. What the Memory Lab is asking you to do is to participate by adding an object from your life that represents some form of personal conflict, you can put it there and put down your story. If you want to, you can put down your name—but you don’t have to. What happens over time is that the idea that conflict is large/outside/faraway gets dismantled. Conflict is also small, conflict is also interpersonal, and navigating conflict is a skill we never develop because we never think of conflict as something we need to talk about. We continuously shove it under the carpet and never realize how lasting the effects are, that we are inching from a suppressed personal conflict to aggression to violence is never visible. These Memory Jars have objects like cigarette packets signifying that this is the object that is responsible for the key conflict between me and my parents; or broken bangles where women are talking about moments of violence in the home. So it traverses a wide spectrum of conflict that ultimately gets connected to a room that they have seen earlier but the assimilation is slow. From what seems political, social, large we arrive at the personal—a continuous interplay between the personal and the political in some senses.

There is a sound installation under the stairwell about Bachuben Nagarwala and her life called ‘In this House and That World’. It is an intimate experience, a somewhat voyeuristic view of her life and her choices but also an invi-
tation to begin a journey of discovering the building, an invitation to participate in a process of reflection.

The first floor has the Sorry Tree. Apology is such a political act in Gujarat specifically and elsewhere generally. But it also stems from our concern about how difficult it had been for a lot of people to occupy spaces alongside survivors of violence. I wondered if an inability to apologize was a cultural problem—this is only a proposal, I am not certain about whether we didn’t learn to say sorry or we haven’t produce spaces where you can say sorry. Visitors write personal notes behind printed cards that say ‘I am sorry’ and tie them to the tree. This is towards the end of the tour, so you have been in the building for an hour and fifteen minutes before you reach the Sorry Tree. And some of the things that people have written have been so absolutely moving. There are testimonies of what they might have done (without names), some times of shame, of embarrassment, also of love and longing.

The museum uses the two floors slightly differently. The ground floor comprises conceptually fixed spaces—the display may or may not change. For example, the Constitution is fixed in that room, but how it is displayed might
change. The first floor, on the other hand, has only temporary exhibits—exhibits that last for about a month and a half, two months. One of the larger exhibitions we hosted is called *Blue Icon: Contemporary Reiterations*. It was curated by Sudharak Olwe who has been photographing manual scavengers and talking about what it means—for him—to be a Dalit photographer.

Another exhibition we displayed earlier this year is called *Microsubversions Playbook*. It was looking at everyday resistance.

One of the things we do while we put together an art exhibition is to ask, of course: What kind of art? What kind of thematics? But, also, who are these artists? Who is it whose work is on display? That is an important question that one is asking continuously because, otherwise, in the contemporary art space, it’s so easy to get lost in abstraction on the one hand and market driven choices on the other. So, we are always asking the questions: What, How and Why—and never losing sight of the ‘Who’.

We have also hosted an artist called Rollie Mukherjee who painted on the themes of half-widows and disappearances in Kashmir for about four and a half years; we supported this exhibition at the Conflictorium in Ahmedabad and travelled with it to Srinagar, to Calcutta. There came a time when we realized that it was important to slowly break away from Ahmedabad and Gujarat, because a lot of people were coming and telling us that they wanted to do the same thing where they were. A lot of schools came and said that they could do this back in their school, whether it was building shelves and putting jars with tags. And I realized that, slowly, step by step, we were going to have to move into other contexts that invite us. That we didn’t want to be a prescriptive museum in any sense, not about our content nor the context we worked in. So, we waited for
people to come to the museum, waited for them to figure out how it may be relevant to their context and then we facilitated similar things wherever they were.

Another exhibition we curated was *Imagining a Forest*, which looked at forests and our relationship with them, which tried to explore the complexity between the urban and the forest. An exhibition like this involved even PILs on display, for example, that have been filed by Paryavaran Mitra, an organization that works with the environment in Gujarat. Side by side, there are paintings by artists like Raju Patel from Dang. An exhibition like this—and every other we try and do—Involves a cross-section of voices and positions. It is not that everybody believes in one idea, it is not a neatly curated exhibition of convergent voices. There might be people within the exhibition who disagree with each other. For every event that is done within the museum, for all the testimonies in whatever form, whether as tags on the Sorry Tree or whether as stories, one is also aware that
we are in a neighbourhood. A lot of us who work at the museum come from the other side of the city. Now quite a few people from the neighbourhood also work at the museum. How are we relevant to the immediate neighbourhood? In the vicinity are wedding bands who practice and have their shops. So we have done an event with these bands, and shared communication on social media. The posters were made like conference posters and put up at cafes and universities. Such events are positioned as open events for people to cross over from the other side of the river. And a lot of people do, imagining that this is going to be a gallery event. So we have audiences who would typically not engage in events like this.

This kind of dialogue or cultural production that occurs, with and by artists, practitioners, audiences, students crossing the river to be witnesses—these are conversations that are valuable to the Conflictorium process. Children who live close to Mirzapur come into the building with a sense of ownership in their stride. It is a porous building, so they hang out at the building. Once, they said: ‘We want to do a newspaper of Mirzapur because there’s so much happening in our neighbourhood, and we have seen how you put up paintings, and we want to put up these newspapers as paintings.’ This was their idea. They even insisted they wanted ID cards as reporters. So, we put together ID cards for them and they put together a newspaper on Mirzapur. They went about and collected stories about their neighbourhood.

These are just some of the examples I wanted to share with all of you. Within these examples are embedded some of the strategies to begin a process of transformation rooted essentially in the self.
Srilika Chatterjee. I am from Mangalore. It was quite fascinating for me to know that you can have a museum dedicated to conflict. Because the moment you use the word ‘conflict’, a person like me, an average social-sci-ence student, immediately thinks that conflict means political conflict which has a profound historical sig-nificance. But I find that you have taken that many steps ahead in representing conflict even in our per-sonal lives. This is a new take on conflict for me. I would like to ask whether your project has created a space or dedicated a space for the lady, that particular lady who, in 1942, had earned a professional degree to be a hairstylist? I am sure she, and other such gentle ladies of that era, must have also gone through their own quota of conflict. So, did you take that initiative to dig around and find out what she must have gone through, trying to achieve social acceptance as a trained hairstylist during that time?

Sethi. We have an installation that is dedicated to her life and her practice and that really culls out what it could have been for a woman like that to be practising hairstyling at that time. It is an eight-and-a-half-minute audio piece and quite an experience to sit there and listen to. So, yes, we do have something like that at the museum.

Audience Member 1. At the outset of the presentation you mentioned that you would also be talking and thinking about this from the position of being a dancer. I would like to hear a little bit about that.

Sethi. You have touched an emotional nerve there. This is an experience for a lot of middle-class children across Tier 1, 2 and 3 cities. If you are interested in music,
dance, painting, a statement often hurled at you is: ‘You can’t make a career out of this.’ ‘It is great as a hobby, but you can’t take it seriously.’ I often wonder if there were spaces or platforms in Ahmedabad city that were available to me, where I could confidently go back and say that I don’t have to have cultural capital to build a career in dance. I would have been in a better position to have negotiated that. Why I’m bringing in this personal story is that we had some fantastic institutions in Ahmedabad but they have become isolated. Islands of sorts. I know so many young people who were interested but who had no place to test whether they could be good at this. I think what the Conflictorium attempted to do was open up the notion that you don’t have to be an expert to be here. You may not have fantastic skills, but you may want to say something—so, why don’t you use this platform? I don’t know for how long, because these things also change. Cultural capital is built over 10 years, and institutions that start out as alternative often become mainstream, I am aware of the pitfalls of all of that, but at least we can do it for 10 years. This was the analysis back in 2013 and, today, if I were to make an analysis, there are at least 10 new backyard spaces that have opened, that are doing cultural work. That was a paradigm shift that was very important.

Audience Member 2. Thank you for a very emotional and thought-provoking presentation. I have three quick questions for you, stemming from our own experience right now in trying to conceptualize and plan a mobile museum, focusing on history and dealing with the past in Sri Lanka. My first question is: What is in for them, the community that is directly affected, whose conflict you have depicted through material culture? The
second: Have you involved this community in the initial curation of this museum? And the third: What is the sense of ownership this community has over this museum?

Sethi. At the outset, I want to ask: Who is ‘the community’? Because there is a tendency in this kind of work to say that ‘we work with the community’. In the case of Mirzapur, there is no singular community. There are 10 people who live on one side, who cannot bear the sight of the other 10 people who live a hundred metres away. There is no homogenous, single community. There are the Devi Pujaks and the Muslims, and then there is the Conflictorium—they are all disparate. But the thing is that at no point do we imagine ourselves as outsiders who are playing a facilitation role. We are part of that community, we have as much at stake. Therefore, I don’t know whether I am comfortable with saying that we work with the ‘community’. Of course, there is power play of a different kind on an everyday basis: they are deeply aware that we are not here to help in any way. It is up to them to find meaning in the things that we do. For example, for three years, there was an open dump right outside the building. Then someone in the area had an idea that this was an opportunity for a bit of entrepreneurship—they cleaned up the dump that had been there for about 15 years and put up a food stall. And now when people come for events and exhibitions, after they have finished at the museum, they go and eat there. So, there are new avenues—by virtue of this place—of doing something.

But we have also had disagreements. For example, we had a boundary wall which had one window. We thought of putting in another to get more light. Just
outside the window is the street and then homes. A group of 10 came in with lathis and said they wouldn’t let us make another window—because when people came to this building, they would be able to look out into their houses. So we stopped.

There is conflict, but there is also resolution. For instance, when there is a performance going on which is looking at silence and very minimal movement, that is inevitably the day when someone’s daughter is getting married and they are having the sangeet right next to us! That also happens. The resolution was: we requested them to reduce the volume for about two hours; by way of return I said, ‘I will come to the wedding and dance.’ They asked, ‘Will you really come?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ So, you never know what gets thrown at you.

This question of ownership—I would say that the people from across the river are as much the ‘community’ that we are working with. They come and use the space. A lot of people are using the space and making meaning in their own lives in small ways which are outside our language of impact. Somehow ‘impact’ finds no answers in what we do. But it’s a big word for anybody who is working with sponsors, I guess.

Shaguni Bhattacharya. I am from Delhi Public School, Pune. I just wanted to ask you: What are the kind of challenges you faced to begin with? Because you are perceived as coming from a very patronizing place and deciding what you need to do for that place—especially when you are dealing with the people who, I am sure, may have considered you as the other. You wanting to do something in an area which is surrounded by, from their perception, somebody else—whom they don’t identify with. So, what were the initial challenges you faced when you thought of this idea?
Sethi. I think the small advantage for us was the absence of a homogenous group. They are all so diverse. There is another Parsi house there—a three-storeyed house, it has its own politics, it’s called the Parsi Haveli. It is really a mixture. In those days, within that kind of mixture, we didn’t really stand out in a very big way. But that is not always the case and may not always be the case. This question of being a patronizing presence that you were talking about, we are very conscious of being that kind of presence. You are saying ‘patronizing’, I would take it a step forward and say we also bring the danger of gentrification into the area. One is aware of these things, and at an organizational, cultural level, one needs to deal with it. Every single day. It can’t be a one-off thing—that you do one event here and one event there and then you’ve balanced it out. It doesn’t work like that.

Chintan Girish Modi. I work for the Education for Peace initiative at Prajnya in Chennai. What I found really interesting is that this presentation is happening in a History for Peace conference. Because, in a lot of discussions about peace, there is a tendency to not engage in violence or conflict at all. There is a tendency to directly move to this imagination of a wonderland almost, where everything is harmonious. I am glad that you are focussing on conflict. At the same time, I would like to ask you: How do you perceive the relationship between conflict and violence? I heard you speak of conflict only as something we do not wish to see or that we want to transform into something else. But would you also think of conflict as generative, because from conflicts can emerge new structures that are probably a lot better than the ones before? For example, the feminist engagement conflict is essential to imagining a world that is more equal. I also really enjoyed what
you said about the Sorry Tree. It made me think of meditative spaces at the Holocaust Museum in DC and the Museum of African-American Culture. So to look at how art and healing—and that connection—can happen in a museum space. Because, from what we heard yesterday and the day before, a lot of the unimaginative government museums don’t have this space for delving within. You are making that possible, so thank you so much for that.

Sethi. Thanks. I see your point about conflict being generative. The Conflictorium and the Gulbarg Memorial were announced together in a newspaper report. The Gulbarg Memorial is attempting an artefact-based, memory-based remembering of an event which is important. But the question is whether people want to remember. What about forgetting? Those are the kinds of questions I was asking at that point of time. Even now, I continue to feel unsure or uncomfortable, as a practitioner, to enter into this space in a prescriptive manner. Maybe that’s what opened up the option of saying: Let’s talk about conflict, let’s talk about why we are doing this. Can it snowball into some sort of resolution?

Can we bring out what people don’t want to talk about? Sometimes conversations that start off very cordially after a film or performance at the Conflictorium become very, very heated. There are many disagreements, there’s a lot of anger. But that anger, because it’s triggered by a literary piece or a performance piece, is felt in a deeply moving way. And the people continue to engage with the Conflictorium no matter which side they are on. So, conflict is generative for sure. But what are the triggers and do we have the facilitation skills to transform it from upheaval to being generative?
I think that is something that we also struggle with. It’s not like we know it all. But we are aware that we will have to work with it.

**Aatreyee Ghosh.** I engage in community arts with my partner. Someone here mentioned that there was nothing called advocacy there. I like the fact that you allowed people to get back to you. This is coming from a social sector background. You were quite conscious about making some breaks. We too work with the social sector and we often see the difficulties. What also seemed overarching, even with Abhi’s project and yours, is that you are living that. There is no difference. I am sure you sometimes forget that it is a project, when you are dancing at a wedding there, and that is important, that celebratory thing about it not only being a part of the museum space . . . the spill-overs, the borders and boundaries are redefined every time. It is very evident and very clear. Thank you so much.

**Sethi.** Thank you

**Audience Member 3.** I have two quick questions because I am in events. That is the first thing that struck me: How do you decide what performances or what exhibitions are important enough to put up in the Conflictorium? Second, at the beginning of the presentation you mentioned that this is generally a very disturbed area where the Rapid Action Force is always ready to come in. How do you get people there? Because there is always this thing at the back of people’s minds that ‘What happens if we get stuck there? So, we won’t go for this performance.’ How do you get people excited enough to come there and participate in something like this?

**Sethi.** For the first two years, what you are speaking of was very real for us: the fear of crossing the river. But
maybe because everybody who works at the museum has had conversations with someone in their building, someone in their neighbourhood, who has asked, ‘You are going to Mirzapur, aren’t you scared?’ And they have said, ‘No, I go there every day.’ Then they will turn around and say, ‘I haven’t been there in all the 45 years of my life, despite living in Ahmedabad.’ So, yes, we were up against perceptions built on prejudice. At some point we decided we had to start doing something every day, or three events a week. And for the first two years, we would sometimes have only six people turn up. But at least the word spread as did the notion that we were doing something not available anywhere else. I think we had to spend a lot of strategic time, if I may use that word, in branding, so that we could get audiences from across the river to come and engage with this content. So that was the strategy at that time, which changed over time. More people know about it in Ahmedabad. Now, we don’t have six people, we have 46 people, sometimes we have 100 and we have to say, ‘We don’t have space!’ But I feel that these are also curves, and we will have to immediately respond to these too as the landscape changes.

One thing we tend to respond to is: what is coming up in the media in a big way? What is the media silent about? Who is not acknowledging what? The immediate becomes one way of deciding. On the other hand, we go through a planning process and say, ‘Can we, through a year of curation, show voices that have seldom been represented? That becomes one curatorial method. We often put out calls for application—‘If you have something, why don’t you bring it?’ The question to ask is: In what places do you disseminate those calls for application? Of course, you have your social media
and so on, but you also have to do it the old way of putting posters out in colleges on this side of the river. You still have to use channels beyond social media.

**Vanshica Kant.** As somebody who has an academic training in history, I find it more fascinating than a lot of the projects and initiatives being used in public spaces to bring history from the realm of the academic space into a larger public discourse, and that it is being led by individuals like you who don’t necessarily have a background in that subject, and who come from, say, a background of design or filmmaking and so on. I’d like to know, when you were ideating this project—because the concepts deal with conflict at the local, regional, probably even national levels, (you mentioned that one portion had leaders from the national movement and so on) and you are dealing with spaces which look at collective and individual memories of conflict—did you have a team of people from other backgrounds as well? How would different individuals from different backgrounds react to a curation like this? Because you are cutting across themes like caste, religion, gender and so on. So how would it cater to a wider audience not only in terms of individual backgrounds, socio-economically, in terms of academic experience, but also on other levels? And second, you mentioned that you are trying to attempt to (if I followed correctly) move beyond this space, taking conflict and curation to where it is actually needed. To communities that are outside, communities experiencing conflict. If you can speak a little more about that? You’ve created the space—but how do you evolve from here?

**Sethi.** I want to quickly respond to this aspect of taking work where it is needed. If I talk about it in the context
of Kashmir, and about taking the exhibition there, I don’t agree at all to the idea of ‘where it is needed’. Because where it is probably needed most is in Gujarat, for people in Gujarat to see what is happening to people in Kashmir. The conflict is in Kashmir but it needs to be viewed here more than it needs to be viewed there. There they are living it. The conflict is also influenced by a whole group of other people who are not engaging or directly involved in the conflict at all but are building a perception about it and thereby influencing policy. Are those the mindsets that we can change? Very often it may involve showing work where the conflict is not happening, or it might involve working with audiences who might be perpetrators more often than victims. I am not saying that one is more important than the other. But what the Conflictiorium often tries to do is work with multiple perspectives. And your other question, I think it is a short answer: Yes, we did work with several kinds of expertise, from ethnography, from journalism, from history. But it was really like a design-thinking workshop. When we all came together in a room and said, ‘How do we feel about this and how can you, from your discipline, respond?’ The point was also to really become interdisciplinary — how a historian can also have a point of view about design and representation, how a designer can imagine how an analysis can be done.

Audience Member 4. Thank you for a wonderful, really moving experience. I have two or three questions. One is that you talked about the jars of conflict—is this by invitation? Do people going in there actually put in an object or something? So, if they happen to have that object with them at that moment and then they write, and then, afterwards, what do you do with that? Those mountains of objects?
Sethi. Often, visitors who come to the Conflictorium come multiple times. Also because there are both fixed and temporary works. Often, on their first visit, even if they don’t have an object, some of them are moved to come back with an object and put it there. That space is open. What do we do with the objects? We are now in our fifth year and we have begun to archive all these objects and stories, and put them all together, hopefully, into a publicly accessible archive on a website, on a web-based platform. But for the past five years, it’s really been about the collecting. We are a very small museum. That has been an advantage, it has allowed us to do the kind of things we have done at that scale, and to really think through one idea for a very long time—on the proverbial slow flame. It is really now that we are building an online archive of these stories, even of the Sorry Tree tags, for example—they are also photographed. But with the Sorry Tree tags, I think we are OK with them decaying and sort of passing away with the tree—I think that would be in the spirit of how that tags were put up.

Audience Member 5. The acknowledgment of conflict and the inescapable nature of conflict in our lives is so important. But as I grow older, I find that our children are being brought up with a lack of acknowledgement of conflict, and the lack of the ability to listen. To me, it seems that lies at the root of so much. Are you making any deliberate attempts to getting younger children in, to reflect on these things, to listen and how to listen and all of that?

Sethi. Yes, we do work with children and we do reach out to schools and involve them. In fact, we have some bylines and tags that we keep using, like: ‘Keep talking, keep listening.’ I will give you an example which perhaps adds to what you mention. In Ahmedabad, the
project of segregation is almost complete. Therefore, you can be a child of 12 in Ahmedabad city and go through life without encountering the other of any kind. Schools are different, public parks are different, cinema halls are absolutely different. There is no rule—it is just an unsaid understanding. We are talking about lack of acknowledging conflict. There is no opportunity for encounter at this point of time—no encountering difference and what it means. And the next step which is acknowledging the results of difference—either being in conflict with it or celebrating it.

Audience Member 6. I was really struck by what you said about Ahmedabad being so segregated. I had no clue it was this severe. And in light of that, if the city is so segregated, how is it that you manage to pull in both populations?

Sethi. Civil-society methods and ideas on both sides are quite reified. A lot of civil society that wants to do good work also finds it difficult when an encounter with a different kind of mindset happens. It is not helpful to combat opinion with opinion. The advantage of working within the arts or cultural realm is that it is not based on an opinion or in the cognitive space. A lot of it is based on how I feel, how an artwork moves me. I can’t articulate it, I feel uncomfortable, I don’t know how I feel—these are the kinds of responses that art practice has the ability to bring out. I think that is what makes it possible at that moment to draw in multiple perspectives that might be divergent.

Anjum Katyal. I was intrigued by the fact that you talked about how one is completely segregated. Yet, you also said that the space you are in is so completely diverse.

Sethi. The place in the city where there is that diversity, there is a ‘disturbed area’ label put on it. I think the
kind of content that we bring in and the fact that we often personally go and invite people—that helps. For example, if we do a performance on Soz Khwani, which is telling the story of Karbala, we make it a point to visit and invite the people who are right outside our building, from the Devi Pujak community. It is also interesting that both the Rath Yatra and the Moharram processions pass through right outside the building. Those are days when we have to shut the museum, because it’s just too volatile. Ritual practices of the perceived other have a chance to be demystified. That which is unknown becomes alien. You fear alien, and when you fear alien that translates into hatred, into violence and so on. And because Soz seems like a song, an aesthetic experience, it doesn’t feel wrong to be in that room. So a lot of curatorial processes are actually strategic processes. How do you bring people together to just discover differences?

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Aanchal Malhotra. I work with oral history and material culture of the Partition of India. Earlier, on the first day of this conference, Sudeshna Guha talked about the division of objects between independent India and Pakistan—how the country divided public objects. I look at personal, mundane objects that people carried to India or Pakistan at the time of this momentous creation of two nations. I hope that the nuances of material culture and the methodology will come out in our conversation. But I want to go over, very quickly, the kinds of objects that people carried because my work is also visual. Since it deals with artefacts, with objects, it is very important for us to look at things. So I am going to talk about the varieties of objects that people carried over the last five years, what the different categories are. And of course, please remember that each object has a story. Why someone carried something, how they carried it, why they chose that particular thing—tells a lot about the class that someone came
from, the knowledge they had about Partition and how they dealt with these things.

So these two images are where the project begins. I encountered, in 2013, two very mundane objects that had been carried from Lahore to Amritsar: a ghada in which lassi is made; and a guzz, a yardstick used to measure fabric. Despite the ordinary nature of these objects, when the person whose father and mother had carried them across began talking about them and caressing them and touching them, the Lahore of his childhood seemed to come alive. It is as if objects can be used almost as ‘transportive beings’—to not only go back into time but also cross a border that is now, for most people, uncrossable. That began an exercise in the excavation of memory for me: can we understand belonging through belongings? Can we understand a home rendered inaccessible by national borders through the things that remain of that home? Utensils are something that many people carried, and I have a variety of photographs of the different kinds, ranging from the mundane to the highly decorative to objects of cultural value, like a khasdaan or silver soap dish. People also
carried weapons, of course, for safety. So daggers, small pocket knives and swords. A sword from Mirpur whose story I will share a little later. People carried objects of religious value—small idols. They were fleeing for their lives. So often they carried small things. Some managed to carry large objects, but most often they were small. Most often they were thinking: ‘Nikal rahein hai, kya le?’ (We are leaving, what should we take?)

Think about it: if you are leaving home, what is the first thing you take with you? Is it something precious? Something you need, like utensils to cook in, if you are going to be in a camp? Something valuable, like a murti? Would it be your copy of the scriptures? I found a particular Guru Granth Sahib that was retrieved one month after Partition, when someone went back across the border to their home to get it. The Guru Granth Sahib was just 2 x 2 inches and it was stuck in someone’s turban—that’s how they carried it across the border to India. Many people thought the Partition wasn’t going to be a permanent thing, so they carried their keys. Because they were so certain they would return. They carried documents of identification, like passports, degrees that verified education and, of course, aided as identification, employment certificates. They often carried government certificates too because they thought they would get government jobs on the other side similar to what they had on this side. They carried some curious things too, like the Karachi Club membership card—the woman who owns it swears she can still get into the Karachi Club if she goes back and shows this card. They carried refugee certificates. Not surprisingly, they also carried jewellery and valuables, so that they could sell them or use them as collateral. Various kinds of jewellery, often in styles that are no
longer made, or no jeweller will touch any more—like Basra pearls that are hardly found now. Tolas and tolas of gold, coins and currency. They carried things to be used, like different kinds of trunks. They were often ordinary trunks, meant to transport things from one place to another. They also carried books and notebooks. There is one that belongs to the Punjabi poet, Prabhjot Kaur, who continued to write nationalist poetry through the Partition. The date on this notebook is 21 August 1947. They carried photographs—some had the luxury of having photographs taken and then being able to carry them along. Photographs of houses, of grandparents, portraits made in India. Photographs of friends, photographs of parents. They also carried objects of cultural value: things like phulkari, a very community-driven activity in Punjab; nalas—old fashioned nalas for the salwars, again very coveted souvenirs for Punjabi women; nameplates—lots of interesting nameplates, carried as markers of identification; furniture—some people managed to carry furniture.

Sometimes people carried along their animals as well. There is a story I recorded, that I wrote down in my book, of a family that carried their parrots. They were a very wealthy family, and they moved from Delhi to Karachi on a plane, and they took along their parrots. The Sardarji pilot said, ‘Oh, you are carrying your birds—I couldn’t even carry my sisters!’ After that, the buying and keeping of pets was banned in that family for ever, because they became a reminder of all those people who couldn’t make it across. There is a crocodile that has a far more comical story. It’s a 15.5-foot-long crocodile that is now up in a home in Lahore. It was the prized possession of a man in Bharowal village on the River Beas. During Partition, because it was such a
prized possession, he picked up the head, he rolled up the skin and he carried it to Lahore. All these give you a sense of the very different kinds of objects that people could carry despite the fact that we always hear ‘Kuch nahi laye the’ (we didn’t bring anything)—‘there was no time’. People did carry things and these things continued to exist in their private lives, within their homes, due to their extremely mundane nature.

Anam Zakaria. My interest here is also oral history like Aanchal’s, but I have been documenting that through a different technique and medium which I will be talking about through the course of this conversation. I am also very interested in identity politics. I have been documenting oral narratives of Partition and I have been particularly interested in the inter-generational memories: the ways in which our perception, our understanding of Partition continues to shift over the generations. Partition is not a static event for me but, rather, an ongoing journey. I have been looking at the way narratives, particularly textbooks, have an impact on the younger generations in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Apart from Partition, I have also been working in Kashmir to understand the ways in which conflict is impacting the people of this region. I am also working on Bangladesh, looking at the ways in which conflict, 1971 in particular, is remembered or forgotten in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Tina Servaia. To start with, I thought that we could have a discussion on how, very often, we think of oral history as an inferior method of history—it’s often not recognized as an equally valid form. So, could you touch upon the methodology of oral history? Something else that struck me was that you’re collecting objects and stories and archiving them, but these then have to be
interpreted. So what is the process, what is the difference, and do you need time and/or distance between the processes of collecting and interpreting?

Zakaria. That is a very interesting question. When you sit with someone and record their narratives, the memories are so powerful that you are completely taken by them. It takes me a lot of time when I go back and begin to process them. Something I began to notice while I was doing this was that I, as a researcher, as an oral historian, am armed with lots of biases, lots of ideas I have grown up thinking about Partition, lots of ways in which I imagine Partition. And often in an interview, we tend to impose our own understanding on the interviewee. So it is very important to come back and to listen again and see where our biases are starting to creep in. To see whether we have allowed our interviewees to speak, or whether we have sometimes stopped them unconsciously. So, for me, after interview, coming back, sitting by myself and re-hearing the audio—new things come up every time. Sometimes I feel I could have probed more. Then I go back and do another set of interviews. Then I have this huge chunk of memory to sift and sort through, and that takes a long time. I think, one of the beauties of history is that it is so subjective. Every time you come back to it, there is some new meaning you that you discover. You have to allow yourself that time, you have to allow those various subjective meanings to come in, so that you can understand what is being said holistically.

When you are archiving, you are so invested in what the other person is saying. But when you go back and hear the recording again, you become aware of other things. If it is video, you notice body language. If it is audio, you notice silences, you notice the tone
changing, you pick up non-verbal messages. Those are so significant and give you a lot of information to interpret, analyse. Often those prompt you to go back if you can.

**Malhotra.** I want to echo everything Anam said. Because it is all true for oral history. But just to contextualize, because this is a conference for historians and academics and teachers who teach history: What is the purpose of oral history? Why are we studying oral narratives? There must be some vacuum or some gap in our understanding of a particular event, particularly if the event is rather close to us and still contemporary—like the Partition. Somebody said on the first day: What if we could go back in time and ask the people who were studying about ancient and medieval history, what they thought of their past? And in a way, Anam and I and people like us are quite lucky because we can in fact do that. So, why is oral history important for me and why am I collecting it? For me, the umbrella term ‘Partition’ is massive. Fourteen million people displaced—and that is just the official number. Many say it was up to 22 million—one million killed here, one million killed there. But what oral history attempts to do is to see the single person who moved from one place to another not just as a statistic but also an individual. And that’s really important.

Referring to the ‘silence’ that Anam mentioned: many people who’ve lived through Partition do have silences. Some talk, some have silences. It’s important to explore the reason for this silence and how we can study it in its varieties. Because Partition is a conglomeration of many things—history, politics, identity, oral narrative and memory which in itself has drawbacks and changes. It is very important that when we record
people’s memories, we understand that memory is also unreliable. So we use different techniques, different approaches.

Anam, for example, goes back multiple times. I look at the subject through the lens of objects. Maybe because I need an ‘in’ into the event. If I ask, ‘Why did you carry this bangle when you crossed the border?’, the story becomes about the bangle and through that story I learn the story of migration. I learn about the bangle, but also about the family that carried the bangle, Why this bangle? Why did you choose it? Who did it belong to? Who gave it to you? What house did you live in? When did you hear about Partition? How did you make the journey across? What was your life like before that?

Another thing that oral history—particularly Partition history—teaches us about is undivided India. This is very important because we cannot study the Partition as an isolated event, stretching from the Noakhali riots in 1946 to December 1947—that’s not the span of Partition. It happened way before and, as Anam said, it very much lingers. We are still feeling its consequences. Oral history allows us an expansive breadth of knowledge in all its versions depending on who you ask, depending on what of the country/countries you are asking about and how.

Servaia. One of the primary benefits of oral history, I feel, is that it is one way of challenging the dominant, stereotypical view of history. The history that is taught in schools and colleges, in classrooms everywhere—that is very often a monolithic history. Could you comment on that please—do you agree? Of course, it can re-enforce the stereotypes as well, depending on who we are talking to. So how do you deal with that then—when the stereotype is re-enforced?
Zakaria. I will read a particular passage that talks about how oral history can challenge the typical understandings of Partition, and then I will answer your second question about what happens when it ends up reinforcing those stereotypes. This passage is from an interview I conducted many years ago at a border village in Kasur. I met a man called Naseer Aashiq who told me of a *mela* that happens at the line of division at the border, where Indians and Pakistanis come together.

Iqbal sahib explains to Ashiq that I wanted to speak with his uncle regarding his visits to India in the early years. He laughs and responds in Punjabi, ‘Then you should have come here a few days later, on third *sawan* (from the local calendar). A huge *mela* (festival) is held that day where Indians and Pakistanis come together to pray at the *mazaar* (shrine), just on the zero line.’ I lean forward with interest, wanting to know more about the festival that brings together two historic enemies. However, despite belonging to Lahore, a city that lies at the heart of Punjab, I have never been taught to speak Punjabi as part of the modern education system, and have only recently started to learn it on my own; it is, after all, seen blurred lines as an uncultured language confined to rural corners, not suitable for the educated and ‘civilized’ elite. I turn towards Haroon and ask him to translate for me; he is far more fluent than I am. I want to know everything about this *mela*.

The *mela*, as we find out, has been held since before Partition and continues till date. Indians and Pakistanis both attend, under the vigilant eyes of the rangers. They bring food and *mithai*, and greet each other from across the line. First the Indian group is allowed to pray at the shrine and then the Pakistani lot.
If I am to believe Naseer Ashiq, the border, which is meant to divide on the basis of religion, serves as a source of connection for Indians and Pakistanis for religious reasons itself. Together they come to offer their prayers, in their own customary manner, at a shrine that they both revere and respect—a shrine that is Hindu, Sikh and Muslim; each to his or her own. Religious and geographical distinctions come to be blurred at the line of division itself.

This is paradoxical, almost self-contradictory, to say the least. Born in the late eighties, I have grown up hearing stories about Hindu, Muslim and Sikh divisions, about how the communities could not live together primarily because they could no longer practise their religions side by side. A new country had to be formed: Muslims were a separate nation; their practices were at extreme variance with the non-Muslims of India. ‘They’ worshipped multiple idols, ‘we’ worshipped ‘one Allah’. There was nothing mutual; there were no grounds for unity. Separation was necessary. To hear that Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims could seek blessings at the same shrine, that they could come together to greet, hug and celebrate together, is an anomaly for me. To unite on top of that at the very border which is meant to divide is almost satirical. For Naseer Ashiq, however, this is the only normal that he knows. Later, I am to find out that there are many other such melas that take place across the country. At some of these, for instance at Baisakhi at Ram Thamman, in Kasur district, local Muslims and non-Muslims come together to celebrate, while at others, the festivals take place at the LoC or other lines of division across the country and Indians and Pakistanis come forward in celebration from both sides.
‘It was here at this *mela* that my father, Saraf Din, met his Sikh family after 1947 for the first time.’ Sikh family? His father was a Sikh? Taken aback, I interrupt him in English, looking at Haroon in complete confusion while Ashiq in return looks at me puzzled, unsure of what I just said in the foreign language. I ask Haroon to confirm whether Naseer Ashiq belongs to a Sikh family that continued to stay on this side of the border. That would be most fascinating, for in a land of 3 per cent minorities it is not common to run into non-Muslims. But no, he answers. ‘I am a Muslim and so was my father but he was adopted by a Sikh in India before Partition. He didn’t have any children so he asked my grandparents to give him my father.’ I wonder how Saraf Din’s parents felt about him having a Sikh upbringing, but Ashiq brushes off my question with a shrug. It holds no value for him; nor is it something that has concerned him. For Ashiq the situation is simple. ‘The Sikh gentleman brought up my father with so much love and devotion that my biological grandparents were only happy and as a reward, God graced him with four sons and a daughter later on. His other sons, my *chachas* (uncles), were called Sucha Singh, Acher Singh, Bajna Singh and Khoja Singh.’ He doesn’t find it necessary to mention the daughter, his aunt’s name. ‘The Sikh family was my father’s real family. Even when the Partition riots broke out and Sikhs and Muslims were killing each other, the Sikh gentleman ensured that my father was safely sent to Pakistan.’

Saraf Din was fifty-five at the time of Partition and looked just like a Sikh, wearing a *pagri* and beard matching that of his father and brothers. To me this sounds almost surreal; a Muslim boy with a Sikh father and Sikh brothers and sisters. However, I am told that
contrary to what most Pakistanis and Indians like myself believe today, such hazy divisions were common in the pre-Partition days, when communities intermingled with each other, their identities getting diluted in the process. Ashiq, unlike myself, has grown up hearing such stories from his father. His understanding of the ‘other’ is not rigid like mine, nor is the division between India and Pakistan and Indians and Pakistanis as stark. Living at the border, where he can see Indians across from him, further reiterates the arbitrariness of the lines of division. Despite the armed forces and border controls, he has probably come into contact with far more Indians than the ordinary Pakistani. They are not strange and imaginary figures for him but instead, are a part of his daily existence.

**Malhotra.** I know you couldn’t hear everything that Anam is saying but what she is reading is from the first chapter of her book *The Footprints of Partitions: Narratives of Four Generations of Pakistanis and Indians*. If any of you do manage to pick it up, that is the story about Kasur that she just read out.

**Zakaria.** I am sorry you couldn’t hear all of it, but the idea was: here I am as a third-generation Pakistani with so many prejudices, so much hostility that I have acquired through the years. Unfortunately, Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are all, in many ways, indoctrinated in this. So here I am, sitting with someone telling me a completely different reality, a reality at the very border where Indians and Pakistanis come together, the way they greet each other, the way they participate in each other’s festivities. So that provides an important challenge to state narratives, to the holes in state narratives. I think that’s important.
But to come to the other question that Tina asked: What happens when these oral histories also feed into those stereotypes so that it re-enforces them? I think that definitely happens and part of that is the impact that state-level narratives have on personal memory. When the state chooses to remember a certain version, a certain side of the truth of a historical event, and continues to accentuate that one truth, it has an impact on how people recall and remember that event. In Pakistan, for instance, because the bloodshed is heavily re-enforced, and often re-enforced in isolation, we don’t talk about any other possibility or narratives of Partition. Many a time, when I would go and do these interviews, these were memories that the Partition survivors also recalled, they had it ready on the tips of their tongues. So, for instance, for 20–25 years of my life, I heard my own maternal grandmother’s experiences as a volunteer at a refugee camp, of aiding the ill, of the massacre trains coming in, of the corpses she had to bury, and it was everything I had read in the textbooks, it was everything that was stereotypical about the narratives of Partition. It was when I went back to her and decided to ask her different questions, when I decided to listen to the silences, that I began to uncover other truths from her life. I asked her, ‘You know, you lived in Lahore in Model Town. That was a Hindu-dominated area. You went to school there—didn’t you have any Hindu or Sikh friends?’ I then started hearing about these friends. All of a sudden, I started to hear rescue stories, how her sister was saved by a Sikh family . . .

Partition needs to be seen on a spectrum. You will find shades of all kinds of narratives. They are not only harmonious, they are not only violent—they are contradictory. And those dichotomies and contradictions are the only reality for the Partition survivors. It is my
job as an oral historian to be able to sift through those and reveal those deeper layers. Especially those repressed memories that have for too long been silenced by the state.

Malhotra. There is an interesting report about L. C. Jain, who looked after Kingsway Camp, one of the largest refugee camps in Delhi, being interviewed about the state of the camp. I should mention that all four of my grandparents came from across the border, and that two of my them lived for about five years in this particular camp. It was a very large camp with four different lines, in which people were housed in different ways depending on ‘financial circumstances’. Now, Jain commented on the camp as very clean, very good, people were happy, things were peaceful, because that’s what he saw as a camp commander. To juxtapose that, there is a report in a book on the psychological impact of the Partition mentioning how a few young boys in the camp were interviewed. They had come from across the border and created a gang. So, Jain is looking at the camp at the same time as these boys are living there. Jain says that the camp is very peaceful, everything is great, people are behaving well with one another, everything is running smoothly. Meanwhile, this young gang of boys used to go to the train station, board the trains going to Pakistan and kill people. Their rule was: kill someone shorter than yourself. It was a game. You might think it’s awful, but it’s the truth—and the truth is indeed very painful to hear. So, like Anam was saying, there is a spectrum of experiences and we need to acknowledge, accept and then try to dissect what those mean in terms of memory of conflict, memory of violence vis-à-vis memory of peace. All of these exist in the spectrum of Partition memory.
There is an anecdote I recorded about a village in Langrial in Gujrat district in Pakistan, where a Sikh choudhary of the village asked everyone—all three populations that lived there—Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs—to bring their papers of landholding and burn them. Because if no one knew whose land belonged to whom, no one could attack one another. He was quick to make the connection that identity—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh—is linked to land in some way. Another thing they did in that village is that Muslims wore black turbans. Soon, every man began to wear a black turban, so that if anyone came from outside, they could not tell who was of what faith.

I think the purpose of oral history in memory is to challenge our notions of what we think we know about the past. Because Partition was experienced differently by different people. Even if two people came from the same village and then moved away to the same village, their stories will be different depending on their personal experiences. Of course, oral history also reinforces many notions that have been ingrained, like Anam said, by the state or our families at some point—the biases that we have. When I was recording interviews in Pakistan, I was made very aware of being the ‘other’ many times. We have talked about the ‘other’ so many times in this conference in these last two days. 

Aap faraq hain, aap mein or hum mein (you are different, there is a difference between you and us). Hum alag hain (we are different). Tōh yeh feeling jo alag wali hoti hain, kab aur kaise ayi aur kyun ayi. Because mujhe faraq dikh nahi raha tha (So the feeling of being different, when how and why did it come I don’t know. Because I could not see any difference.) I couldn’t see the difference. Of course, that is a very reductive and naive way
to look at differences or similarities. But I couldn’t see it and yet I was made to feel that ‘otherness’.

Oral history reveals many things that we don’t want to see, or have purposely overlooked in the past. But these things are important to see, understand and acknowledge. So why do we do this work? Because there is a need to. Why is it that so many third and fourth generations, who are descendants of refugees, never asked these question? I never asked the question before these objects. It took the catalyst of material culture to prompt me into asking what I really wanted to know, which is the malleability of memory.

Servaia. Yes, let’s talk about the malleability of memory. I think a lot of cognitive scientists have questioned how reliable memory is as eyewitness testimony. So, if oral history is basing itself on memory, how do you deal with this malleability of memory or mis-remembering or perhaps even deliberate mis-remembering? It’s not just that memory had changed over time, but people may deliberately mis-remember. What also happens sometimes is that the family story or the state story will have an imprint on the kind of memory that a person has. So how do you deal with that?

Malhotra. There is a lot of emphasis on trying to find the truth. And I think oral history, in many ways, like I was saying, helps you sift through state narratives, to recover other memories of Partition. It offers you another glimpse or another shade of the truth. But we have to remember that history, all forms of history, at the end of the day are subjective in interpretation. Even ‘facts’ are not self-evident givens as Urvashi Butalia says. It is important for me to understand what people have chosen to remember or chosen to forget and why that may be happening. What is important enough for them to
remember? What have they silenced? And what are we finding in the silences? It is not to do investigative journalism. Rather, it is to report people’s experiences, even seventy years after such a traumatic event that continues to shape them in so many ways. My job is not to sit there and probe and get down to the facts of it. My job is to say, ‘Here we are, seventy years later. How does this continue to impact you? What can I take away? What can I learn? Or unlearn?’

**Malhotra.** I think there are many things that I unlearnt along the way, which is natural. It happens and it hits you in the face and you feel rather stupid for it. For example, deviating a little from the topic: When I first went to Pakistan, I was curious. What will Pakistan be like? What will the people be like? But it’s the same! Like Anam said, state narratives and media affect a lot of what people remember and how they remember. That being said, I think, right at the beginning, we need to understand that if memory is about remembering, it is also about forgetting. Like recall is also about *not* remembering certain things, whether you consciously eliminate the thought or tell yourself over the years that *that* is the truth. You reinforce that truth and you remember it that way. That’s important to keep in mind.

The other thing is what Anam said—our job is to record the multiplicity of narratives, so that we have enough data (1) that it will exist, and (2) that you can corroborate certain things with one another, which is very important. Say you have 10 interviews from people from 10 different areas of the walled city of Lahore. And they all claim that in August 1929, they saw Pandit Nehru standing on the banks of River Ravi saying, ‘Poorna Swaraj.’ That happened—because 10 people remembered it that way.
Because memory is unreliable, there are certain academic sources we must always refer to—we must keep this in mind too. Our job, first as oral historians and second, as writers of oral history—people writing books about things that will be read by a public, some of whom know certain things about Partition and some of whom don’t—is to arrive at a combination of oral history and academic sources as best we can. This is because we are trying to put together the most holistic portrait of a time when we were not present.

**Zakaria.** If I can just add something here. I think, as Aanchal is saying, it is so important to not see these mediums as contradictory. We often tend to divide conventional history and oral history as two opposite ends of the spectrum, but they can really supplement and complement each other. Now, when we are talking about conventional history sources in South Asia—I know that yesterday’s conversation was on textbooks, so perhaps much of it has been covered—we have an issue of history being distorted to serve political ends. And then you have to question how objective that conventional source of history is, how censored or distorted it is. Oral histories and conventional sources of history can supplement each other—so one does not need to see them in conflict or opposition. Rather, one must see them as complimentary. That is the only way we can get a holistic understanding of the past.

**Servaia.** That is what strikes me the most—that mainstream history, if I may call it that, gives us one view. But oral history, whatever it may lack in accuracy at times because of the failures of memory and the problems associated with memory, adds so much in perspective. You gain a lot that you wouldn’t otherwise. And I think this is a very important tool, especially for classroom teachers.
Malhotra. I think we are making it sound as though recording memories is easy. You just go to someone, you ask the questions, you get the answers. I do want to stress that oral history continues to be a very difficult realm of study, if I can call it that, because you are taking the burden—the term ‘burden’ being very loosely used—of someone’s memory upon yourself, not just for the purpose of archiving or recording but also to study. And that is complex and it is heavy. I am lucky that there is someone like Anam on the other side of the border, so we can have these conversations, because it is so rare. I just want to stress the continual difficulty of the medium, not just in asking the questions but in getting people to open up. Because, when you go to someone’s house as an oral historian and a scholar, you are essentially a stranger. Certain things need to be done to build that trust, and we all have our private/personal methods to do that. You’re asking someone to excavate something of great vulnerability and give it to you because you asked, you want to know. And I think in that process of exchange, you also need to give something. It is, therefore, a very difficult field of study which should only be utilized as a tool by people to learn more about the past.

Servaia. Another benefit that we were talking about yesterday was that oral history can help us make connections which perhaps would not otherwise be possible. So, would you like to share the story of the house in Dalhousie? I think it’s very interesting.

Malhotra. Of course. In my book I’ve written this story about a woman called Sitara Fiaz Ali—how she invited me to her house in Lahore to talk about these hand-carved Kashmiri utensils she had carried from Gurgaon to Mianwali in the centre of Pakistan during Partition.
She called me to the house and talked about the utensils, but she didn’t really want to talk about them. What she really wanted to talk about—through this house—she showed me a black-and-white photo of a house that her father, Miya Afzal Hussain, had built, from 1937 to 1942, in Dalhousie. The length of the time it took shows us how very difficult it is to build in the mountains. But, she would tell me again and again, ‘We left the house, we left the house, it was so beautiful!’ She had decided the colours of the windows. She showed me this black-and-white photograph and this colour photograph which someone had taken maybe in 1965. They had gone to see their house and taken the photograph. And she kept talking about that. In my book, I have mentioned this house very casually—I didn’t think it was very important since it’s in the past. Later, you realize your own naivety. I mentioned this in the interview and asked her who lives in the house. She said the last she’d heard, two Sikh brothers. And that was the end of the conversation.

Then my book was published. And a Sikh gentleman with an orange pagdi arrives at my family’s bookshop in Delhi, clutching the book. He is worried, even frenzied, and rushes into the shop and demands to meet the author because—‘I am reading this book, my wife got me this book, Chapter 17 is about a house—“Kaikisha”.’ The house’s name is Kaikisha which means galaxy. Now, remember the woman’s name is Sitara, her sister’s name is Surya. Clearly, Miya Afzal Hussain is obsessed with constellations. So, this Sikh gentleman, Ambassador Gurdeep Bedi, comes to the shop and says: ‘This house that has been talked about in Chapter 17, it is my house, I live there, we were given it in a claim after Partition. How is this house in this book?’
So, my mother tells me about this, and I burst into tears and I call Mrs Ali in Lahore and say I’ve found her house, I found the brother who lives in the house. She says, ‘Oh, I wish they’d send us some photographs.’ She hasn’t seen the house in 70 years and, clearly from our conversation, she loved it dearly. Now, because I am shameless, I invited myself to Dalhousie—the Sikh gentleman was quite taken aback.

This is me in Dalhousie, holding the black-and-white photograph that Mrs Ali gave me, standing in front of the house. As you can see, nothing has changed: the Sikh family has not changed a single thing. In fact, the brothers remembered taking the exact green can of paint and painting over the house to retain that quality. The inside of the house is the same. It is stunning. Afzal Hussain built it like a planetarium. It was round because he was obsessed with constellations. The Sikh family kept his nameplate—M. Afzal Hussain. Everything becomes very real with material artefacts from the past. Afzal Hussain carved stars and sun into the ceiling. He did it all over the house, carved little stars, little constellations. It is beautiful, absolutely beautiful.

Then, when I was in Dalhousie, I figured I might as well go and see if any of the old records are there of
the house, because a lot of the pre-Partition records kept by the British were quite good. So, I go to the district office and I am shown a huge stack of files on one side of the room—there is another side with the exact same stack. And the gentleman showing me is extremely reluctant, saying it will take too long since there are so many files. But I tell him I will help him. It takes us the whole day, but we eventually find File 123—Buildings by Miya Afzal Hussain. At that moment, it struck me so forcefully how real it all is. The file is there, everything is there—it’s not like you’re finding a manuscript by a king you knew existed. This is an ordinary person, an average person—and his handwriting, his file, all of it is here. And the plans of the house. I photograph them (even though the gentleman’s telling me not to a hundred times) and I send them on WhatsApp back to Lahore. This is the first time Sitara is seeing her father’s signature in years. This is the first time she is seeing the letters he wrote—and he was a copious letter-writer. There were about seven years of letters about the drainage system in the house—the *nala*. It is very difficult to construct in the hills—we don’t realize this. But I was going through seven years of letters saying the *nala* is draining water into my house, the *nala* is going here, the *nala* is going there—he took great effort to document everything.

It was amazing because it was coming full circle and becoming very real. The last letter in the file is dated 12 May 1947, when Afzal Hussain is asking the government for an extension—he wants to build an extension to the kitchen in May 1947. So, clearly, there are no plans to move across the border, he is going to stay there in a summer house. And it is heartbreaking to receive the news of Partition. He stays back for about a month after Partition to wrap up everything, but then
he has to give up the house. Hence, the Bedis get it in a claim.

The reason I go to Dalhousie is, of course, to Skype with Sitara Fiaz Ali, to show her her house. She hardly says anything, but she is very happy. Then I give the phone to the Bedi family and I let them take her around the house, show her the walls, the ceiling, because it is a rather intimate conversation. At the end of the conversation, I hear the daughter of the Bedi family, Harleen, say to Sitara’s daughter: ‘Agle saal hum hamare ghar mein milenge (Next year, we will meet at our house)’. So it shows you that these things are possible. It is not a Pakistani family and an Indian family talking to each other but two families that shared the history of a house and have put themselves in that house. So, I think that the one thing that oral history does is to make us feel as though, even if only for the duration of that conversation, the border is not so cemented, it is not so engrained.

Zakaria. Recording oral history, especially across the Line of Control or in other border villages, really shows you how much the reality of the people living by those borders is different from how we imagine it to be. For the longest time, the Wagah border is how I had imagined borders, with soldiers chest thumping on both sides. But if you go to some of these other borders, you realize that the ‘other’ is not really the ‘other’. And sometimes with Partition, people just ran to the other side and settled right across from where they used to live. I have heard narratives of people who could see their homes on the other side after migrating because they had settled right across that line, in their new ‘safe haven’. There are also narratives of people coming together and meeting their families, divided families, at
the border, at the Line of Control. These are things that you will often not get to hear in other accounts of the Partition.

Malhotra. People also represent the border in wonderful ways. So there are weavers in Gujarat who wove this border into their fabrics. What is the border? It is a line! And how do they explain it: this is where we were, this is where we were sent. The government put these rural women from Sindh in a place in Gujarat. But there, they were not indigenous in terms of weather, in terms of climatic conditions, yet they had to stick to it. So they talk about it through creative means, they put the things that they remember from their house into their weaving. I recorded a story, here in Calcutta, of a woman who had come from Chittagong, who kept saying that when she came to Calcutta, she missed the flora: ‘I missed the flowers of Chittagong.’ She describes smell, and this is where oral history allows you to be a little creative because you can record all sorts of memory. She says, ‘I try to sow the same flowers here. Next time we went back, we got seeds and I tried to put them here in Calcutta to have my own private Chittagong. But, of course, nothing would grow because trees and plants bear allegiance to their soil. Like people, they cannot be uprooted and planted elsewhere.’ It is very poignant if you think about it, what people try to do in order to grapple with a new sense of identity.

Servaia. Another benefit of oral history is that it allows you to bridge the gap between generations. Anam’s work is very cross-generational. I was wondering, when you interview someone from the generation of the event and then you interview someone of today’s generation, how is Partition viewed by each? And what do you think is the impact of this distance vis-à-vis time on our memories of Partition?
Zakaria. Before I started this work, I would have assumed that the further you moved away from Partition, the easier it would be to let go—of that hatred, that prejudice, that bitterness—and move on. And yes, many people have been able to do that. But what I found, what I continue to find when I work with schoolchildren in India or Pakistan is that the further away we move from 1947, the more ‘Partitioned’ we have become. The younger generations, in many ways, are far more hostile than their grandparents who suffered Partition. This is a consistent discovery for me, and I will share one anecdote that I think summarizes what I’m trying to say. I was planning this exchange programme for The Citizens Archive of Pakistan, a local Pakistani NGO and I was supposed to bring a delegation of Pakistani students to India. One of the students who wanted to go was not allowed by his family. His mother said, ‘He cannot go to India. I have heard all kinds of horrible stories, I don’t want you to go’. When I went to try and convince her, she said, ‘My father was born in Hoshiarpur and he lost everything over there during Partition. He lost his family, he lost his property and I’m afraid that if my son goes, he too will never come back.’

Malhotra. OK. Her father had come and his grandchild wanted to go to Pakistan and the mother was very against it. Then she spoke to her father and she was actually quite keen for the grandchild to go and he eventually got to go.

Zakaria. The point is that, many times, Partition survivors, as much as they have suffered and witnessed bloodshed, also remember a time when the ‘other’ was not really ‘other’ but simply a part of their everyday reality, part of their everyday experiences. That is no longer the case. Today, when you say Indian or Pakistani, the words
are loaded with communalization, division, hostility. And, of course, with the wars, the media debates, the rhetoric of antagonism and hostility, the textbook biases, all the negative perceptions get entrenched and start to influence you. As for the younger generation, most of them will never meet an Indian or a Pakistani on either side of the border. For them, these distortions of history or these censored versions of history are the only truth. It is very hard for them to think of those on the other side of as anything other than almost-monsters. Of course, I am speaking about a certain segment of the population—I don’t want to say that all Indians and Pakistanis do this. But my fear is that it is becoming worse, because access to the ‘other’ is becoming more and more limited. How we imagine the ‘other’ is becoming more important, and that imagination is often fuelled by a lot of prejudice or politics or media or textbooks and such.

Malhotra. Sometimes, within families itself, the silence of the parent or the grandparent who witnessed Partition adds to this prejudice as well. Lack of knowledge can add to our biases about people and that is very prevalent in families—especially for children who sometimes only hear about the violence, so that their construction of the narrative is somewhat linear. Because violence happened in Pakistan or because violence happened in India to my family, hence the Pakistani or the Indian is bad. When I went to Pakistan, people were shocked, first of all, that I was from ‘Bharat’, because I did not look like or speak like an Indian. They did not know what an Indian looked like, and they expected me to speak and dress like the actors in Indian TV serials. So, how are these narratives constructed and how is the identity of the ‘other’ constructed—these are very
important issues when it comes to the second, third, fourth generations.

**Zakaria.** I completely agree with you: the younger generations are getting a very packaged view of what happened. And that is happening through the oral histories particularly because traumatic memories stay at the forefront—that is what we remember, they are the charged memories. The other memories of friendships, of longing and nostalgia all too often start to recede. The younger generations are often only getting that version of the truth which is then reinforced in their schools—the teachers are reading from the same textbooks. So the cycle is continuing. Then they come home and watch the same thing on TV.

Social media, of course, can bridge many of these divides, but social media is a tool and it depends on how we use it. Often, social media will further reinforce the same kind of biases that are present in other forms of media and history textbooks as well.

**Servaia.** How do you think the tools of oral history can be used in the classroom to develop the sort of historical temperament we have been talking about for the last two days?

**Malhotra.** I think two things have been mentioned already: Janaki mentioned the wonderful ‘Young Historians’ videos, and another teacher mentioned the use of oral history projects in Bangalore. Introducing objects is always very interesting. They don’t have to be Partitioned objects, they don’t have to be objects that bear conflict or migration within them. But sometimes asking children to bring in old objects from their homes creates very interesting narratives. Because it is a tangible thing. Sometimes I have seen it with objects that are from the other side—the children don’t know
anything about Pakistan but they know that this object is from Lahore. Where is Lahore? I have no idea. Lahore is this beautiful place that my grandfather came from. So, try using tangible things—it is very interesting and easy.

**Zakaria.** I agree. Something else that really helps me is the Skype exchanges I do between students sometimes. Before the Skype exchange, I ask them to speak to their grandparents or parents about their memories, not particularly of migration but two/three memories of the place that they grew up in. When they share those, they are not only bridging the gap between Indians and Pakistanis by talking to each other, they are also bridging an inter-generational historical gap in many ways because they are bringing together memories of their grandparents. Often, the way they speak about the space or what they remember about a particular city or a village would be similar across both sides of the border.

**Question-and-Answer Session**

**Audience Member 1.** In Indian Partition history, the first time, at least as a student of literature, I heard of oral history was Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. And while Butalia brought out stories or testimonies of those women, one of the main charges labelled against her—the criticism against her and Ritu Menon—was that the mediator always comes in. The person who is listening, his or her politics, his or her ideas always come in and that has been one of the major problems in oral history or in it being taken seriously. So are we listening to the narrator’s version of the story or are we listening to the
mediator’s? How do you take care of that when you both are recording?

Malhotra. I started this work in oral history with a very particular interest in how my generation perceives it. And I have to say that when I am recording these histories, I am a very objective observer. Because I learnt very early what happens when you get involved in the story. What the person remembering requires is a point of retreat—distance. To be able to view the story. What the oral historian becomes then is that point of distance. You’re not a participant in the past you are a participant in reconstructing the past. While writing, I think it is very important—and I have done it in my book—to have me in the conversation because I am understanding as well. And whether I have shed a bias or gained a prejudice, I am adding that in the narrative as well. Because if it happened to me, it is likely to happen to someone else too. I guess having myself in the rewriting of what I have heard is more important than my mediating the conversation at that moment. Recording is one thing. And listening, transcribing, translating, and understanding—that’s a totally different process. So, I think, to have me in the narrative, in the final narrative, is essential for me. Because me and my generation are trying to unpack certain things.

Zakaria. I am going to echo everything that Aanchal said. The narrator will always come in. When I do an interview, particularly if I do it in another language, I come back and then I translate it. The words I choose indicate that, of course, I am bringing my meaning into it. The only thing I can do is to allow myself and the reader to see, as much as possible, where I am coming into the conversation. I often mention what question comes into my mind as I sit here, what appears challenging to
me, how I am interpreting it. Sometimes I also say: This is what I understand, but perhaps there is another way to look at it. For example, if I am in Muzaffarabad in Kashmir and someone says to me, ‘Look, you know, we still have temples over here that show that it is a very multicultural civilization.’ I go to that temple—and then I discover that it is non-functional. Now, there are two ways for me to interpret this. One is to say that this person is living in some romanticized version of the past where they think it is a multicultural civilization. There is no idol inside, so obviously it is non-functional and that multicultural civilization has been eliminated. Or, I can look through that person’s lens and see what he or she is trying to show me: that this temple here, it is a remnant of that past. So, often, as a narrator, you can have that dialogue and you can put the different questions in your mind onto paper, so that your readers can get access to the many shades of that conversation you have had with the interviewee as well as with yourself.

servaia. What you say is true for any field where we have human beings studying human beings, whether it is psychology, sociology or anthropology. I don’t think that this is a weakness specifically in this area. It is something we need to be aware of. It is unfair to tag only oral history for this.

Krishna Kumar. I want to make a theoretical point which may perhaps contribute a little bit to what is being discussed here about history, its nature, its value in education, in the curriculum and so on. After finishing my book, Prejudice and Pride: Social Histories of the Freedom Struggle in India and Pakistan, or rather after its publication in 2001, I became very restless, thinking that I hadn’t actually finished understanding what I had set
out to—how textbooks sculpt the mass-mind of these two nations: India and Pakistan. So, two or three years on, I thought I must write another book and eventually that book, *Battle for Peace*, was published in 2007. Now, when I was working on that second book, I came across an interview in the Pakistani magazine, *The Herald*, published from Karachi around 2004—an interview with the Begum of Bhopal. She had chosen not to migrate to Pakistan in 1947. She was a very modern woman, both for her situation and for the times. She thought at that time that India would be a better place for her to continue to live in and, being the Begum of Bhopal, she was able to do so. But, as years passed, she changed her mind and finally decided to migrate to Pakistan. Now, in this interview, she shared many feelings about her first decision, about her second decision and then about her subsequent feeling that she had made a mistake.

A few months before the interview was published, she passed away. I found the interview an extremely rich piece of text. Of course, it was an oral interview transcribed into publishable text, so perhaps it was edited here and there, but it was a very complex and rich text. I thought it was very useful for my work, which was to sort out layers of the interaction between the two countries which continues to take place on many levels in the mind, levels of memory, levels of desire and ideas about the future. It was a grand text, I thought, so I started analysing it. The analysis, when it was ready, made me look for a title for that chapter. When we use oral history, I think we sometimes forget that it is actually an oral resource for history. It is not history, yet it can be useful for history. So, I came up with another title or another name for this particular
kind of data which had proven very useful to me for my work. And the name I gave to that history which the Begum was sharing with the world, a few months before her death, was ‘Perceptual History’. And in this chapter, and in the rest of the book, I have argued that, if well-written school textbooks on history want to make an impact on the popular minds, especially on the layers of early socialization, then these textbooks as well as the teachers who use these textbooks, no matter how good these textbooks are, must acknowledge perceptual histories and then engage with them. So that a more dynamic version reaches out to children, one that is capable of enabling them to become introspective and analytical about what they have picked up from so many different sources and which lurks in their socialized minds.

Malhotra. Thank you, Professor Kumar, for that. It echoes our thoughts as well.
Aanchal Malhotra is a visual artist and oral historian working with memory and material culture. She is the author of *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory* (HarperCollins 2017) and the co-founder of the ‘Museum of Material Memory’, a digital repository of material culture from the Indian subcontinent, tracing family histories and social ethnography through heirlooms, collectibles and objects of antiquity.


Tina Servaia is Head of Humanities and Arts, Calcutta International School.
I am grateful to PeaceWorks for having given me the opportunity to be here, but before I begin, I want to place all my cards on the table. I am not only not a historian, but I am also a geographer. This is perhaps the kind of situation that Mark Twain’s Connecticut Yankee found himself in, when he landed up in King Arthur’s court, for he was not only, not from the Isles, he was an American! No wonder then, that in the presence of all these historians, many of whom I have grown up revering, I am more than a little diffident.

Through my presentation and the accompanying images, I will try to draw your attention to some common elements, actually minor details, in medieval architecture, which we tend to overlook. Somebody has said that God is in the details, but I am trying to locate the Devil in the details.

We begin with the pitcher, I don’t have to introduce the pitcher to you, nor do I have to point out to you that perhaps from the time that we learnt to fashion the earthen
pot and learnt to fire it and acquired, for the first time, the capability to transport water to our huts and hovels, the task of fetching water, at times across miles, has been entrusted to women—men only consume the water, they don’t fetch it. This assignment has received official sanction, the fact that the officials were all men, is a minor detail.

Archaeological evidence suggests that fine terracotta vessels were in use for cooking in the early Harappan period. The Harappans also produced large vessels that were used, perhaps for storage of grains. A large number of small pieces of pottery have been excavated from Harappan burial sites probably indicating a belief in afterlife, just as such pieces of pottery have suggested similar beliefs in other ancient civilizations. Each civilization was defined through the pottery it made, the Roman and Grecian amphorae and urns, and our own terracotta and painted grey ware.
I believe that once we began to settle down along the riverbanks and initiated agricultural activities, we also began to make pottery—pitchers, cooking vessels, vessels for votive offerings and for rituals of birth and death, large storage urns to store the harvest and also small vessels to store seeds for the next crop. Small pitchers—the kalash—that stored seeds, because it contained life in it, came to be associated with the womb and came to be called Garbh Kalash. The coconut too came to represent the womb, both had life in them, but we will talk about the coconut later.

Very soon the kalash began to be used in fertility rituals and continues to be used so even today. The use of the Garbh Kalash in wedding ceremonies is nothing but the continuation of that tradition during the weddings.

The kalash had a large number of other uses as well. A few years ago, while travelling through Kutch in Gujarat, I saw four or five stacks of pitchers, like little minarets, lined against one of the walls inside a hut. The pitchers contained grains, pulses as well as money, the family’s savings, buried in the rice or flour pitcher, other pitchers served as almirahs for clothes.

In my childhood, if you arrived at school in a set of crumpled clothes, one of your teachers was sooner or later going to ask: ‘Ghade se nikaal ke pehne hain (Have you taken them out of a pitcher)? The pitcher continues to be thus used till today at least in places untouched by ‘development’.

If you visit the Jami Masjid built by Qutub-ud-Din Aibak in Mehrauli, you will read or be informed by the guides that the pillars that have been used in the mosque, once belonged to Jain temples. The temples were demolished and the material reused.

Each conqueror did this to the places of worship of the defeated king. This was the only way feudal order could survive. Each victor had to establish that his God was more
powerful than the god of the vanquished, this was one method of ensuring uninterrupted flow of land revenue, but this is not what we are discussing today, may be on another occasion we will take this up.

We know this mosque, as Masjid Quwwat-ul-Islam, a name given by the British. Qutb-ud-din Aibak never called it that. Let us go back to the stone pillars, in the middle of the pillars, there is a kalash.

The large number of pillars with kalash-es carved into them helped archaeologists identify these as Jain temples. Kalash-es, Nagas—creatures with bodies of snakes and human faces, bells on rope strings and mask like Demonic faces were elements commonly carved on pillars in Jain temples. These pillars were reused for building the first mosque in Delhi in 1192. Images of gods were disfigured because faces are not permitted in a mosque, interestingly, mask like demonic faces were left intact, maybe, the defacers did not realise what they were.
One of the most interesting things that one begins to notice in the sultanate period structures of the late 12th century is the *kalash*—from the time of Aibak—with spike-like things lining the neck of the *kalash*, and also the one from Alamash’s extension to the Mosque, symbolic perhaps of the mango leaf, the large petals etched on the upper half of the *kalash* are lotus petals. Each of the stones used in the base of the three arches that form the western side of the mosque is adorned by a *kalash* and topped with what could be mango leaves.

Next to the *kalash* we see some text in Arabic. Verses from the Quran were drawn on the stone slabs for the stone masons to carve in high relief. So you have the *kalash* and the text, ‘Bismillah—Begin in the name of Allah’ a symbol of veneration of the Indians and the venerated text of the new arrivals—Turks and Central Asians—placed next to each other.

We have a few more images to illustrate this trend further. Here is the detail from the Ala’i Darwaza, the massive gate erected by Ala-ud-Din Khilji, as part of his extension to the Jami Masjid of Aibak. The south gate of the darwaza
has a profusion of *kalash*-es. We then have an image of a *kalash* from the mausoleum of Adham Khan (died 1562) and from the Khazanchi ki haveli (19th century) from Shah-jahanabad. So from the thirteenth century to the nineteenth century—the *kalash* is a common motif. The *kalash* at Khazanchi ki haveli is covered with lotus petals, just as it was in the case of the *kalash* from the arch in the Jami Masjid of Aibak and this brings us back to the lotus.

The veneration of the lotus as a symbol of purity perhaps goes back to a time when we were still following animist practices. I am not a historian, so this is all guesswork. I would like to believe that somebody—and I would like to believe that it was a woman, because women notice these things much before men do—was walking through an open space when she came across a pool of stagnant water with a whole lot of rotting vegetation, with frogs and snails and mud and in the middle of all that she saw this lotus, she perhaps said to herself, ‘You may rise above all this muck and be pure.’ And I think that is the day the lotus became a symbol of purity.
Later, much later we imagined anthropomorphic gods. These were gods with human traits, they walked on two feet, had families, loved, procreated, hated, fought, ate, got angry and had to be placated, at times with gifts at others with sacrifice, all in all despite their godliness they were in many ways like us and so, once in a while they needed to sit, but since they were gods they could not sit on the ground like mortals and so we placed them on a throne, an exalted throne, the lotus.

Brahma, Mahesh and Vishnu, the Creator, the Sustainer and the Destroyer each had their own lotus throne and so did all the other gods and goddesses. In fact, Brahma, the Creator is born out of a lotus that grows from the navel of Vishnu, with Brahma seated inside. Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartikeya, Ganesha, Mahavir and Gautam—each sit on a lotus. Mahavir and Buddha are historical figures but when we deify them we install them on the lotus as well. Subsequently, Buddhism travels and the Tibetans create Tara, the female Buddha, she too sits on the lotus, there is Avalokiteswara, the earthly manifestation of the Buddha, and Maitreya, the Buddha-to-be, each seated on a lotus.

The Lotus is everywhere in Buddhist mythology and iconography, one of the two Bodhisattvas invariably depicted with the image of the Buddha is always shown holding a lotus and that is why he is known as Padmapani—the one who holds the Lotus.

Let us go back, once again, to the mosque built by Qutub-ud-Din Aibak. The masons who were asked to carve the verses from the Quran were also perhaps asked to embellish the text. The masons knew it was the holy text of the new arrivals. The text therefore could only be embellished with something that was considered pure, associated with the divine, and so the text was decorated with the holiest of all flowers, the Lotus. Another image from the
base of one of the arches shows us a partially broken word in Arabic carved in stone; it says *al-masjid* or ‘the mosque’. The embellishments in this image are lotus buds. The Alai Darwaza, part of the extension of the mosque of Aibak and built almost a hundred years later continues the same tradition. At the lower end in the white marble portion, you see a *kalash*, flanked on either side with text in Arabic, bordered with Lotus Buds. At the entrance to Firoz Shah Tughlaq’s mausoleum, we see lotuses carved on the spandrels—the triangular space on either side of the arch. The image of the lotus inside the motif of the sun is from the central arch at the sixteenth-century Jamali Kamali Mosque, the motif is repeated on the spandrels of the North gate of Arab ki Sarai.
The Muslims do not venerate the sun, they do not venerate the lotus, yet these motifs are everywhere. They were not seen as Hindu motifs, they were seen, understood and appreciated as Indian or shall we say South-Asian motifs.

My submission is that while the building was designed, perhaps by a Turk or Iranian architect, the masons were all local. They knew it was a place of worship or a place of veneration or somebody’s sacred grave, so they carved the symbols that they associated with these precepts. Nobody objected because these were not seen as Hindu symbols: they were Indian symbols. Those who commissioned the building could have had problems with images or carvings like the head of an elephant, but not with these. Later, I will also discuss what happens to the head of the elephant.

If you look a little closely at the Ala’i Darwaza, you will notice a profusion of lotuses. All the exterior walls are covered on all sides with countless lotus buds. Ala’i Darwaza, incidentally, is the earliest surviving dome in Delhi. There were domes that were older but those have collapsed.

Both the dome and the arch, the true arch that is, were introduced to India by the Turks. The Turks also introduced the technique of building with rubble masonry, instead of building with large, precisely cut stones, something that was the prevalent technique of building in India.

In the eyes of the Indian mason the hemisphere of the dome appeared as something that ended abruptly, there was nothing on top, it looked unfinished. And so began an exercise that lasted for 300 years: the masons continued to experiment, trying to decide what to place on top of the dome, to make it look complete. One of the things that they did was to cover the dome with lotus petals and you can see this at the Mehrauli Archaeological Park.
Another experiment was to place an inverted lotus as a crown atop the dome. You can see both embellishments on top of the dome on this Chhatri at Masjid Moth in South Delhi—the dome covered in lotus petals and an inverted lotus as a crown.

We now come to three structures, two from Delhi and the third from Lahore. The ceiling, with glass inlaid in the shape of lotuses at the Sheesh Mahal, and the lotus shaped fountain inside the Rang Mahal were commissioned by Shah Jahan, while the mosque at Lahore was built in the reign of Aurangzeb; each of the small minarets is topped with a dome, emerging from a lotus.

The temple shikhar or pinnacle is normally topped with an amalaka (a wheel with a serrated edge), I have been told
that the *amalaka* represents the seat of gods, the sun; and, because it is the seat of gods, it is also a lotus.

In their effort to find something to place above the dome in order ‘to complete the unfinished structure’ the masons had started, as we have already shown, to cover the entire dome with lotus petals or to top it with a crown framed by an inverted lotus, they now began to use the *amalaka*.

The *amalaka* can be seen at the ruins of votive temples at Bateshwar near Morena in MP and at Ashapuri in Raisen district MP. You can also see the *amalaka* atop almost every old temple in Khajuraho, Konark, Megheswar, Puri, and elsewhere.

Let us return to Delhi: to the second oldest dome in Delhi—the mausoleum of Zafar Khan in Tughlaqabad. You can see the *amalaka* on top of the dome. Above the *amalaka* was perhaps placed a *kalash*, the top of which is now broken, but you can see both the *kalash* and the *amalaka* atop the mausoleum of Ghyas-ud-Din Tughlaq, built nearby within a couple of years.

Finally, it all begins to come together: the lotus and the *amalaka* and there are numerous examples in Delhi. The Nila Gumbad, one of the two Timurid domes we find in Delhi—one in front of Humayun’s tomb, one behind. When you see the *amalaka* atop the dome you realize that they had begun to play with the lotus motif. There is the lotus shaped crown atop which is placed an upright lotus; above which there is an inverted lotus and finally an upside-down lotus—four of them. Midway through all this is placed an *amalaka*. The same thing is repeated at Isa Khan Niyazi’s tomb dating back to the mid-sixteenth century.

Isa Khan Niyazi was a senior commander of Sher Shah Suri. Between 1640 and 1656, when Humayun was wandering through the wilderness, Delhi was ruled by Sher
Shah Suri. Isa Khan died during that time and his mausoleum was built near the Shrine of Nizam-ud-Din Aulia. The mausoleum is the first building you encounter on your right as you enter the Humayun’s Tomb Complex. Here you notice the interplay of upright and upside down lotuses separated by an *amalaka*.

We now move to structures built in the time of Akbar, what is interesting in this period is the fact that with the exception of the Tomb of Humayun, designed and built by the Iranian architect Mirak Mirza Ghias and his son Sayiyad Mohammad, all the other structures built in this period in Delhi continue to follow the prevailing Sultanate style.

The first of these is the Khair-ul-Manazil mosque built by Maham Anga, the foster mother of Akbar, the second is the mausoleum of her son, Adham Khan (died 1562), in the former you see the lotus as crown and in both you see the *amalaka*. Atop the *amalaka*, in the mausoleum of Adham Khan one notices, perhaps the earliest representation of two *kalash*-es and a cone used in the style of a finial. Humayun’s Tomb, completed in 1569, uses the same design in the finial not in sandstone, but in copper covered in gold foil. This shape was to then become the standard in all mausoleums and mosques built subsequently.

We have now a few more examples of the use of the two *kalash*-es and a cone as finial on mosques and mausoleums. We see this motif in use in the mausoleum of Nizam-ud Din Aulia, who died in 1325, but the mausoleum that we see today was built in 1562, in the reign of Akbar, the dome is topped with a *kalash*. So the *kalash* as part of a finial, that we see first in the time of the Tughlaqs, returns 250 years later to gradually become a permanent fixture on domes, by the mid-16th century.

There is a post marriage ritual, known as *godh bharai* during which a coconut is placed in the lap of the newly
married girl. The coconut is also a symbol of fertility because it contains life within and therefore these two kalash-es and the cone—and I reiterate this is all guesswork—were symbols associated with fertility.

Some of the earliest temples would have been temples to gods of fertility. Life was something that we did not understand, just as we did not understand death, and so all ancient mythologies created gods of birth and death. Some of our earlier temples would thus have been dedicated to mother goddesses, to goddesses of fertility and the kalash, seen as a symbol of the womb, would have gradually become a permanent fixture at these temples eventually growing into a motif that became common to all temples.

The modern Sun Temple in Chandni Chowk has a finial made of two kalash-es and a cone—the cone, I am sure, symbolizes the coconut. The same atop the Gauri Shankar Mandir in Chandni Chowk built by a Maratha chieftain, Apa Gangadhar, when the Marathas ruled Delhi. The same finial is visible atop the adjacent, but older, Digambar Jain Lal Mandir.

You will also find the same kalash and coconut motif atop Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib at Chandni Chowk and at Gurdwara Dera Sahib in Lahore built by Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

So what do we see now, from the mausoleum of Adham Khan to Fatehpur Sikri Mosque at Sikri near Agra to the Fatehpuri Mosque, the Digambar Jain Mandir in Delhi and the Gurudwaras at Delhi and Lahore the domes have different shapes but each one of them has the same finial. Temple, Mosque, Gurudwara—it did not matter. They sported the same crown.

And now we come to the kalash and the coconut. You would remember the kalash—Garbh kalash and fertility connection that I had alluded to in the beginning of this
presentation. I don’t know whether it is used in other parts of India, but in north India this is standard during weddings. You have a large kalash topped by a smaller kalash and then you have the coconut on top. This has to have its roots in fertility rituals and that is why it has pride of place in a wedding—a fertility ritual solemnised.

Perhaps the most easily recognised early use of two kalash-es and a cone on a dome is at the mausoleum of Humayun. The die is now cast and the arrangement becomes like an idée fixe, you can now see it everywhere. At the Jama Masjid built by Shah Jahan, at the Moti Masjid built by Aurangzeb, inside the Red Fort, at Zeenat-ul-Masjid built by the daughter of Aurangzeb, Zeenat-un-Nisa Begum and the Fakhr-ul-Masjid built at Kashmiri Gate by Fakhr-un-Nisa Begum, widow of one of the commanders of Aurangzeb and hundreds of other mosques.

The next motif I wish to draw your attention to is the swastik. We say that the swastika originated here. It did not come into being with Hitler using its mirror image, but much before that. Even tribal communities in South America who have had no connections with Brahmanical or Semitic traditions, have been known to use it. People in ancient Egypt, Greece, Malta, Tibet, Japan and Lapland have
used it and so have the Aztecs, the Balinese, the Hopi . . . the swastika is everywhere.

The *swastik* manifests itself in Mughal architecture too. One sees it in Mehrauli Archaeological Park at the mausoleum of Quli Khan, brother of Adham Khan. There are four arched openings, the interiors have delicate stucco work, each arch bordered with *swastikas*.

The *swastik* is there at the mausoleum of Shams-ud-Din Mohammad Atagha Khan. Each face of the square structure has beautifully carved designs. The central arch on each face is flanked by a beautifully carved sandstone *mehrab* with 6 swastiks carved in the embellishments. Some of the carvings, eroded due to weathering, have been recently restored as part of the restoration led by the Aga Khan Trust.
The *swastik* is to be found also at Fatehpur Sikri, in the two storey palace of his senior queens, Ruqaiya Sultana and Salma Sultan. The *swastik* also adorns the mausoleum of Akbar at Sikandra. You can see the *swastik* given pride of place at the imposing gate, right in the middle of the inlay bands along the arch and at the two ends of the gate—four *swastikas* on the outer face of the gate and four on the inner.

We end our exploration of the use of the *swastik* at one of the gates of the Lahore Fort. A mosaic mural, 1,500 feet long and about 55 feet high, known as the picture wall was commissioned by Shah Jahan for the Hathi Pol (Elephant Gate)—built for the exclusive use of the Royal Family. The mural is bordered with a band of *swastikas* in glazed-tiled especially designed to be placed along the colourful tile mosaic murals of angels, humans, animals, birds and flowers.

What I am trying to underscore through this is the fact that the characterization of these symbols as Hindu symbols is of fairly recent antiquity.

Those who have been working on the history of human navigation have a theory about the origin of the *swastik*: they believe it is linked to the Pole Star and the four cardinal positions of the Big Dipper around the Pole Star. When people began to navigate the seas or crossed the deserts they noticed how the Big Dipper appeared to rotate around the North Star. And we know that navigation started very early. That is how the indigenous Africans travelled and reached Australia 50,000 years ago. On the way, they also settled in parts of India 60,000 years ago. Another branch moved across Europe and across a land bridge to the Americas, about 30,000 years ago. It was these people who discovered America, not a sailor funded by Isabela and Ferdinand of Spain. It is through the journeys of these pioneers that the *swastik* could have travelled all over.
And now we come to the Star of David. We have been told that it is the Star of David and it is on the Israeli flag, but in ancient Jewish lore David is not a major player. David is first mentioned in the Hebrew Bible: Jesus talks of David as an ancestor and a just king but at that time David is not a prophet. Then comes Islam. And by the time Islam arrives, David has become a prophet—Hazrat Dawood Alaihissalaam, one of the most venerated prophets in Islam, like Ibrahim, like Yakub (Abraham and Jacob, respectively).

Incidentally, it is only in the 19th century that the six cornered star begins to be used by the Jewish communities across the globe. But it was not an exclusively Jewish symbol—both the Muslims and Christians made free use of it before it began to be identified with the Zionist movement. Aside from the Arabs and Christians, the ancient civilisations of Mesopotamians, the Japanese and the Indians had used the six cornered star. Incidentally those practicing black magic and the worshippers of the Devil also use the 6 cornered Star, the latter inscribe 666 in the hexagonal space inside the star.

We return to the first surviving dome, the Ala’i Darwaza. Here you can see the six-cornered star. There is a difference between how the Star of David is usually depicted and how you see it here. Here, it is a six-cornered star inside a circle. In the Indian tradition, the two triangles represent two distinct forces, the triangle with the base placed to the south represents *paurush* or male energy and the triangle with the base facing north represents *shakti* or feminine energy; both placed inside a circle represent universe in harmony—masculine energy balanced with feminine energy. This is the Indian yin and yang. Now the question is: Is this the Star of David, the Kagome of the Japanese or the Aadi Yantra or the Shakti Chakra of the Indians?
On Adham Khan’s tomb, you see a lotus inside the hexagram or the six cornered Star of David, if indeed it is the Star of David. If, however it is the Aadi Yantra, then both are Indian symbols. You see them again on the mausoleum of Humayun. What I find intriguing is that the six-cornered star first makes an appearance in the East, South and West facing arches of the Ala’i Darwaza, then you don’t see it again for a while. It reappears in a mosque next to the Bada Gumbad at Lodhi Gardens, above the central mehrab (arch), but it is covered in flowers and it is shifted on its axis by 45 degrees. Its next appearance is on the buildings built by Humayun and in the time of Akbar. You see it in the Purana Qila, in the tomb of Humayun, in the mosque of Jamali Kamali. But one rarely notices the hexagram in later buildings.

This makes me wonder if perhaps the symbol is connected to Humayun’s interest in astronomy; that would
explain its presence in structures built during his reign and immediately afterwards, the six-cornered star is all over Humayun’s tomb, almost a dozen on each face, but one does not see them subsequently, not in such profusion in any case.

And now the Arch.

One of the earliest arches I have seen, (aside from the ones at Ephesus), is in the foundation of the Hippodrome in Istanbul. Constantine built the Hippodrome when he shifted the Roman capital here and named the city Constantinople. You can clearly see the keystone in the brickwork arch. There is some dispute about when it was built—it could have been the early third century or the first quarter of the fourth century.

The true arch is first used in the medieval period in Delhi in 1287. It is the Turks who brought the true arch to India in medieval times. (I read recently that there is use of arches in Kaushambi but since I have not seen any images I cannot comment on this either way.) What is clear is that we begin to see the use of the arch in the post-slave dynasty period because the true arch was first used on the mausoleum of Gyas-ud-Din Balban who died in 1287. So the true arch that has been known to the Turks at least from the 4th century takes almost nine hundred years to reach India.

The shape of the arch is there in Ajanta—all the Chaitya Grihas have the shape of a vaulted roof for their ceilings. However, these are not based on an arcuate structure, because there is no keystone. These were cave like structures carved into the rock face. What they achieved were large halls, some with ornamental pillars, since they were not load bearing members. But the true arch was still to be invented.

I think the inspiration for the Chaitya Grihas came from an inverted boat. Perhaps a builder spent a night
beneath an inverted boat when he was caught in a storm and he was struck by the thought that one could build a roof like that . . .

Before the arch came into existence, there were other methods of spanning space. One of the first was the trabeated opening. The five-storey-deep Gandhak ki Baoli had trabeated openings towards the well at every level. The Gandhak ki Baoli was commissioned by Shams-ud-Din Altamash for the visitors to the hospice of Qutub-ud-Din Baktyaar Kaaki. Considered the patron saint of Delhi, he was the first Chishti Sufi to settle in the city.

The trabeate was two posts supporting a beam or a lintel. The problem with the trabeate was that it could not withstand loads. So buildings with more than one floor that used trabeated openings as doors tended to collapse because the lintel on the ground floor broke under the weight of the superstructure.

The corbel was invented to solve this problem: the beam or lintel was supported by stone slabs in two or three layers, placed on both posts in such a way that they faced each other. With each layer, the distance between the stones
facing their counterpart was gradually reduced and thus the lintel, now supported from beneath, could withstand a bigger load.

We had been making the corbel in India for a few centuries by the time the true arch arrived. With the arrival of the true arch, a very interesting transformation began to take place. The Indian mason, used to building with huge stones and with minimal use of binding material, was not familiar with the rubble-and-mortar-based construction techniques introduced by the Turks and Central Asians. The true arch put together with wedge-shaped stone pieces made no sense to him. His response to it was a stroke of genius: he cut the corbels in the shape of the true arch and put together a large array of arches that are really corbels impersonating the true arch.

The arches in Jami Masjid built by Aibak, those on the mausoleum of Altamash’s son Nasir-ud-Din Mahmood, those on the mausoleum of Altamash and many others, built from 1192 to 1287, are all false arches.

The Indian masons did not understand the physics of the true arch and so they stuck to their tried-and-trusted trabeate and corbel. They inserted a lintel inside a true arch at Mohammad bin Tughlaq’s Bijay Mandal and made a corbelled arch look like a true arch at the mosque of Daulat Khan Lodhi at the Rajon ki Baoli the architect gave the builders a design of a true arch but since the builders did not trust the true arch, they reasoned that the important thing was to get the shape right, and not be concerned with the engineering principles. So they built false arches, corbels that looked like true arches.

There are hundreds of examples like this in Delhi. False arches trying to look like true arches. At the mausoleum of Shams-ud-Din Altamash, you see the false arch. Instead of a key stone at the top of the arch, there is a slab of stone with a little niche cut into it to look like the peak of the
arch and then there are all the separate stones, all of them buried into the wall like a corbel and totally unlike a true arch and yet, unless you look closely, you would think it is a true arch.

Adilabad in Delhi, was the palace of Muhammad bin Tughlaq when he was still a prince. This huge corbelled arch was the next step in the evolution of the arch from the trabeate. Stone slabs placed above the posts projected towards the opposite post and on top was placed the beam. This is how one made large gates. The beam or lintel supported the weight of the superstructure, and if you tried to build another floor the beam would to crack. The corbel was the solution; it supported the beam from beneath. The true arch was the next step.

Muhammad bin Tughlaq’s fort was built in the 1320s, the true arch had arrived 33 years earlier and yet the corbel
continued to rule the roost. The results of a kind of division of labour is visible throughout the Tughlaq and Lodhi periods: whenever there is a load-bearing structure, the mason inserts the corbel inside the true arch and whenever the structure is not load-bearing, the masons tolerate the true arch. This practice continues till the time of Akbar. You see this cohabitation of the corbel ensconced within the true arch can be seen at the mausoleums of Ghyas ud Din Tughlaq, Kabir-ud-Din Aulia and Isa Khan Niyazi to name a few.

You will see corbel arches at several places at Agra and Sikri—for instance inside the Bengali Mahal at the Agra Fort, popularly known as Jahangir Mahal and in Sikri. You don’t see a corbel in Humayun’s tomb—only true arches. The architect of Humayun’s Tomb sat in Delhi for nine years and said: This is how you are going to build it. But the moment the architect died, the masons go back to using the corbel! And all through the reigns of Akbar and the early phase of Jahangir’s life, the corbel is constantly inserted inside the true arches.

Let us look at the corbelled arch a little closely. One form that is constantly carved on the projecting slabs, that are used to support the lintel from below, is the head of the elephant, popularly known as the *gajalakshmi*. In most temples, you will find that the first projecting stone in the corbelled arch is the lotus, in some places it is the bud of the plantain, then the lotus, then the head of the elephant—the *gajalakshmi*. In many places, the *gajalakshmis* hold a garland in their trunks.

But the Central Asians did not build temples, they built mausoleums and mosques. The Central Asian or Iranian architects designed and the Indian masons built. One of the many structures resulting from this joint endeavour is a grand gate to the adjacent mosque—the Bada Gumbad in the Lodhi Garden, Delhi. The masons have been told that
due to religious restrictions, animal figures cannot be carved in mosques and mausoleums and so the elephant head is not permitted.

The masons have been carving the *gajalakshmi* in their corbels for centuries. Sons, fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers they all carved it. So what does he do? He removes the details—the tusk, the eye and the ear, but the shape of the trunk remains. This does not happen only here, this accommodation and adaptation is visible in hundreds of structures built throughout the Sultanate period.

But what is the modified *gajalakshmi* and the corbel doing inside a true arch? Clearly the mason was not happy: he was convinced that the structure was going to fall. So he either inserted a beam and made it a trabeate as at Bijay Mandal and at the Serai opposite the mosque at the Lodhi Gardens, or he inserted an entire corbel inside a true arch as at Bada Gumbad and Sheesh Gumbad at Lodhi Garden.

Can you see the head of the elephant in the inserted corbel inside the true arch at the Bada Gumbad. And can you see this chess-board like carving in the middle? This is the perpetual Chinese knot. What is it doing here?

The pattern must have travelled through the Silk Route, from China to the Middle East and Central Asia,
and with the Turks it reached India. The masons like it and they begin to carve it everywhere. You see it in Chinese paintings, in their embroidery, it is on their menus in every Chinese restaurant, it is on their paper lanterns, it is everywhere, including the cheek of the sandstone elephant at the Bada Gumbad. That is how things travel, can anyone claim ownership of such motifs?

Just as the Chinese knot has travelled from China to India, the true arch too has travelled—from Rome to Byzantium to Turkey to Iran to Afghanistan to India.

It arrives and our masons begin to engage with this new form and this new building technique. They modify the corbel to look like a true arch, they quietly insert the lintel or the corbel inside the true arch. They perhaps told the architect ‘You want this? We’ll make it. If it breaks, you’ll hold us responsible, so we’ll make sure it doesn’t.’ For 300 years they continued to ‘strengthen’ the true arch. It is only around Shah Jahan’s time that the masons were finally convinced that ‘this will also do’.

My favourite arch is the one in Adilabad—it is not visible anymore because the ASI has repaired it. But the real magic of the arch is here: you see the sun through it. All the plaster is gone! I saw it first in 1967 when I ran away from school and spent a day in Adilabad. Then, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, when I was able to buy a camera, I went back once again, and photographed it. This is the magic of the arch.

Back to the mausoleum of Isa Khan: look at the pillars. The massive pillar there is built with just four pieces of stone! And it is the size of a queen-sized bed—two people can sleep on it! The base stone has two holes—these pillars have projections at both ends and the stone on top has holes. They were fitted into each other like Lego toys, very little, if any, plaster was used. This is a technique of building
that prevailed and I think it was the dominant technique of building before the Turks arrived.

What you see here is perfect harmony. The entire foundation is built using techniques that were already in existence. The entire superstructure is built using rubble, limestone and brick mortar that begins to be used on a large scale after the arrival of the Turks and Central Asians. So, when two civilizations meet, they don’t spend all their time killing each other—they are also involved in creating.

I was running a creative-activity centre for kids and realized that children growing up in Delhi didn’t know anything of the city. So I started the Discover Delhi Walks for them and began to show them the city, the way my father had shown it to me. He dabbled in archaeology and other things, so he showed us how the dome, the arch and the minaret had evolved and that is what I began to do. And
then, a nine-year-old boy from Kerala, with young working parents, asked me, ‘Sir, aap yeh musalmano ki building kyun dikhate hain?’ (Sir, why do you show us the buildings built by Muslims?) That is the day when I started looking at architecture closely and realised that one can perhaps dispel the idea of ‘musalmano ki building’ (‘Muslim’ buildings).

All of us have come across the term ‘Islamic architecture’, but most of us have never asked the question ‘If there is Islamic architecture, then there should be Christian architecture also. But no, out there, from where our colonisers came, you have Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, Neoclassical, you have Gothic, Prussian, Slavic, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese architectures, you even have Welsh, Scottish, Irish and English architecture. But is there any Christian architecture?’ The term does not exist, so how can we have Islamic architecture, why have we not asked this question? The term ‘Hindu architecture’ is seldom used. We have now begun to talk of Parihar, Hoysala, Bengal, Gujarat and Rajasthan architectures. But we insist that there is a bird called Islamic architecture.

The dome was built first by pre-Christian Romans for the Roman Senate, a space where everybody had equal status. Inside the Senate, Caesar and Brutus had equal power. It had to be a space where everybody could see everybody else, therefore a pillar-less structure. This process must’ve started centuries before, but eventually, in pre-Christian times, the first dome is built. Christianity is yet to be born; Islam is several centuries in the future. The first use of the dome for worship is by the Jews in their synagogues because they are a congregational religion. The shape is there, they put it to this use. Then the Christians use it, then the Muslims use it. The Muslims are the last to use it but the dome is described as Islamic. Then what about Saint Peter’s Basilica and that white dome in Washington? Mus-
lims have nothing to do with those. How is it that the dome suddenly becomes Islamic when it reaches Central Asia or South Asia? All over the world, all over Europe, when you look at arches or domes you don’t think of Islam but of Gothic, Neoclassical, Renaissance, Baroque. Only in South Asia or Central Asia, it becomes Islamic.

Now, if there was Islamic architecture, the one thing where you would see it, is in mosques.

So let us look at a few mosques, we begin with the Cheraman Mosque at Kodungallur in Thrissur, Kerala. This is the second mosque built in India, the first is at Ghogha in Bhavnagar Gujarat, both built, if popular tradition is to be believed, at a time when Prophet Muhammad was alive. Cheraman from Kerala, it is said, travelled to Mecca, met the Prophet, converted and was on his way back home when he died. His travelling companions are the ones who are believed to have built this mosque. It looks like any large house in Kerala, without arches, without a dome and minarets. It has a sloping tiled roof to face the heavy monsoons the region is subject to.

A few decades ago people from Kerala began travelling to the Gulf in search of work aside from earning petrodollars they also acquired the knowledge that the mosques in Kerala were not Islamic enough and so two squished domes and two spindly minarets were fixed to this mosque. I have learnt recently that the present management committee has decided to remove them and go back to the original shape. I hope this is true.

From Kerala to Kashmir is how we describe this land and our next halt is Srinagar in Kashmir. On the right bank of Jhelum between two of the seven bridges on the Jhelum, namely Fateh Kadal and Zaina Kadal is located one of the most famous shrines in Kashmir, known as Shah-e-Hamdan. The structure is dedicated to the memory of Saiyad
Meer Ali Hamadani, the 14th century Sufi from Iran who visited Kashmir thrice and is credited with introducing papier mache, namda making and carpet and shawl weaving to Kashmir, through hundreds of his disciples who are believed to have migrated with him. Khanqa e Mu’alla (the exalted shrine) or Shah-e-Hamdan is one of the the earliest mosques in Kashmir.

The crown of this structure is like a pagoda. The Fourth Buddhist Conference, I believe, was held by the Kushan King Kanishk at Kundalban at Harwan, near Srinagar in Kashmir perhaps during the 1st century CE. Perhaps this design, that looks so much like a pagoda travelled from Kashmir to China; or maybe the Chinese were already making these kinds of buildings. So you have this great similarity in the design of temples like the Shankaracharya and other temples and mosques in the Kashmir Valley. You must have noticed the absence of arches, minarets and domes in this Kashmiri Mosque—just as these elements were absent in the Kerala Mosque.

Noor Jahan built a mosque in Srinagar with stone, unlike most structures in Kashmir that were built primarily with wood. You see arches in this mosque—but no domes or minarets.

The Jama Masjid of Srinagar was built by Sultan Sikander in 1394 and extended by his son Zain-ul-Abideen. The mosque was damaged in fires three times and was rebuilt but the original layout and appearance has been retained. The earlier wooden roof was replaced with metallic corrugated sheets in the early part of the twentieth century.

The 300-year-old Talo Mano Mosque in Thailand, the fifteenth century Demak Mosque in Indonesia and the seventeenth century mosque in Beijing have all the so-called elements of Islamic architecture—namely the Arch, the Minaret and the dome—missing. Yet they are all Mosques.
Incidentally Islam reached China in the middle of the seventh century—Indonesia and Thailand in the thirteenth century. More Muslims live in Indonesia than any other country but if you look at their mosques, most will not qualify as Islamic buildings.

I rest my case about the falsity of the term ‘Islamic Architecture.’

Architecture is our response to our climate, what we build is determined by the kind of building technology we possess, the building materials available and the intended use of the proposed structure. It is not religion but these things that determine the shape of buildings that we build. The dome needs a flat roof and we build flat roofs in areas of low precipitation. In areas of high rain or snowfall, we have sloping roofs. People belonging to different religions live in all parts of the world—the architecture that has evolved in these areas is influenced by climate and not by the religion they follow.

\[1\] *The Star of David: Between Judaism and Zionism* - Lily Gelman
**Audience Member 1.** Why, when it comes to Central Asia, does the dome become associated with Islamic architecture?

**Hashmi.** These categories were created by the colonisers. This project of creating the ‘other’ did not happen suddenly—a rigorous academic effort went into it. You begin with Islamic architecture, then you talk about Islamic attire, then you talk of Islamic food, Islamic music—and then ‘othering’ is very simple to put into play.

So, for example, all of you would have heard or read that the muezzin climbs the minaret and calls people for prayers five times a day. I used to take every new batch of students of the National School of Drama on walks to introduce them to the city of Delhi. The second time I was doing it, we were in the old city, sitting on the steps of the Jama Masjid. And suddenly it occurred to me that no mosque built before Shah Jahan’s Jama Masjid has minarets!

No mosque in Delhi has minarets. The first mosque with minarets was the Jama Masjid of Shah Jahan built in 1656, that’s when it was completed. And then, I bought tickets for four of the noisiest boys of that group and I said, ‘Climb up the minaret and shout from there’ the rest of us sat in the mosque courtyard and we didn’t hear a thing! They came back after 20 minutes with totally sore throats! The way sound travels is governed by physics and not by faith. Mosques did not have minarets for a very long time.

I was in Istanbul three years ago, and I checked: of the 4 minarets of Hagia Sofia, the first one, brown in colour, was constructed in the 15th century, a second
one was added in the early 16th century and the last two in the late 16th century.

I am trying to make two points here, one that the minaret is not a necessary component of a mosque and two if the minaret is very high the sound of the muezzin’s call for prayer will not reach the ground.

I wrote about it on some blog and a cousin of mine who is an engineer in Lahore wrote to me and said that I was absolutely right. Even if you place loudspeakers at a height of 40 metres above the ground, you couldn’t hear the sound—it would escape into the space.

So what were minarets used for? I have a theory and it could be totally wrong but I love creating these theories because I don’t have to go through the rigours of a historian! I think that all ancient people believed—and even to this day, a lot of people continue to believe—that gods live way up high. We therefore began locating our places of worship on top of hills. But once we climbed the hill, we realized that the heavens had receded, so our places of worship began to rise. The entire building couldn’t rise and therefore only a part rose higher, much higher than the rest of the building: the steeple in a church, the shikhar and gopuram in a temple, the minaret in a mosque. Everyone wanted to reach God. And that is why all the sages from all over the world have gone to the mountains in search of God.

The minaret, to my mind, was built to get closer to God, not to reach his subjects.

Many of these explanations, Islamic Architecture, minarets for calling people for prayers etc are the creations of indologists and orientalists. This entire idea of Islamic culture: for heaven’s sake, what is Islamic culture? A Bengali Muslim, and a UP Muslim and a
Tamilian Muslim—what would they have in common except for the way they pray? Even there, we find a whole lot of differences. If you go past a mosque in Kashmir, you will hear a loud chorus; you will not understand what is going on. Men and women pray in a chorus. Different areas have different practices, there is no monolithic Islam and there is no Islamic culture.

What is presented to us as Islamic culture is essentially Iranian. Islam didn’t come to India through the Arabs. Muhammad bin Qasim came and he didn’t leave too much of an imprint. There was Arab influence in Kerala and coastal Gujarat. But we got our Islam through the Turks, the Iraqis, the Iranians and the Pashhtoons and most significantly from the eclectic Sufis. So, Islam, that started in Arabia, was mediated by the Persian-speaking people, and then it came through Afghanistan and got further modified here. So this entire idea of Islamic culture is as foolish as the idea of Hindu culture or Christian culture.

Audience Member 2. My question is not about the presentation (which was wonderful) but about something you just said that I think has a potential of undermining all the work your presentation did. You said: ‘Islam didn’t come to India through the Arabs.’ First of all, that is inaccurate because Islam did come to Sindh and Kerala. If you are talking in the broader South Asian terms, even to Sri Lanka, there too it came via the Arabs. Second, you just talked about Wahabis as a certain idea of Islam which originated in the eighteenth century, dominating our imagination of what Islam is as a totalizing idea, but to say things like ‘Thank God we didn’t get Islam from Arabs’—that is also a form of discrimination and that is a form of anti-Semitism as well. So maybe you could elaborate on that a little bit.
Hashmi. I plead guilty. I am not enamoured by the Arabic version of Islam. The Saudi version of Islam, I abhor. The Islam that I have grown up with/in was far more inclusive. The Central Asian tradition that I am talking about, that I associate with—the kings got their portraits made, they celebrated drinking, they celebrated inclusion, they celebrated differences. That’s why I am saying that I am thankful that the Arab Islam did not come here.

The contribution of Arabia is a totally different thing—what they did in astronomy, the connection between India and the Middle East, and the contribution that the Arabs made to the world of science is a totally different thing. I am not getting into that. I am only talking about this version of Islam. And if you were present at the discussion we had day before yesterday, where we have people tracing the beginning of Pakistan with Muhammad bin Qasim—it is that version of Islam that I am very uncomfortable with.

Audience Member 3. I come from Delhi and I have visited many of the monuments that you spoke of today. Is it possible that the dome we talk about in Islamic mosques was learning the technology to follow the stupa from inside rather than borrowing it from Rome? In other words, the concept of the dome in the Islamic mosque is actually an advancement of technology where you hollowed the stupa from within? The reason I am telling you is that this is all across Central Asia. Again, I will go back to my favourite historian Hiuen Tsang—he says that all of Central Asia was full of vihanas and stupas. And the stupas and vihanas had four minarets each where the priests climbed up every day to call the faithful. Very recently in Afghanistan, they have unearthed a stupa which looks like an average
pre-Mughal mosque that you find in Delhi. If you go to Kumbhalgarh Fort, which I suppose is pre-Islamic, there is a temple which is exactly designed as an Islamic mosque—even though it is pre-Mughal Indian. You’ve not touched upon the Hauz Khas complex. In most of the Hauz Khas complex, there are no graves except for perhaps that of Feroz Shah Tughlaq.

**Hashmi.** In this world, everything is possible. But you need to get evidence. Now where is the evidence that these were temples at Kumbhalgarh? I don’t know the history of Kumbhalgarh—I don’t know whether it predates Mughals.

Recently we learnt that Maharana Pratap had won that battle. So you know, the history that has been created today, I cannot argue with those histories.

When you say the head of a baby elephant can be attached on the body of a human and this is evidence of plastic surgery, when human DNA and the DNA of an elephant can coexist in one body, then anything can happen.

I have no evidence to say that the vihara evolved from them because the stupas that I have seen were all solid. If you begin to hollow out the stupa from inside, it is going to collapse. There are principles of physics involved in building domes. You can’t just pile up and wait for it to dry and then get inside and burrow—this is not how the dome evolved.

**Comment from the audience.** Architecture is based on a certain technology, on certain laws of building and structure and engineering. If you look at the structure of the stupa, it is totally different from the structure of a dome. The way the stupa is constructed, it goes through a certain pattern on the ground and builds up with rubble to a particular form and those circular
forms change according to where the stupa is located. It has got nothing to do with trying to build this structure up, elevated on the basis of the particular kinds of engineering actions which lead to the dome. The dome is a much more complicated exercise than the stupa. And I don’t think there is any connection between the two.

**Audience Member 4.** You spoke about how academics tend to create otherness by using deductive categories like Islamic architecture, etc.

**Hashmi.** I didn’t use the word ‘academics’.

Did you say historian?

**Hashmi.** No, imperialist. I am saying this is an imperialist project.

OK. Sorry, I heard you wrong. What I wanted to know is that, though it seems that some of these categories are reductive (‘Islamic architecture’, ‘Hindu culture’, etc.), are you making a larger point about identity politics in academics as well? Because some of these categories are also used to fight homophobia or Islamophobia or other kinds of violence that happen.

**Hashmi.** I am only suggesting that when I was in university—history was a subsidiary subject. I am talking of 1969, when I entered college. When we became aware that the definition of history with which we had grown up in school—Hindu period, Muslim period, British period—for the first time, we realized that if this division were to be based on the so-called religious identity of the rulers, a whole lot of rulers were not Muslims . . . that the Hindu period was not all Hindu and the Muslim period, not all Muslim. So if this is how you are going to divide it, then the third period should be Christian period and not British period. And then this division of ancient, medieval and modern, and
contemporary history, it was done at that time, or maybe earlier (we became aware of this debate then). In our schools, we still read the benefits of the English rule—how they modernized India and so on. So, I am only saying that this category of Islamic architecture, which we continue to use in history writing, we need to re-look at, and re-look at the idea of whether culture can be defined in terms of denominational identities at all.

All images courtesy: Sohail Hashmi

Sohail Hashmi graduated with honours in Geography from Delhi University and Masters and M.Phil. from JNU, gave up his Ph.D. mid way to work full time for 10 years with the CPI (M) between 1981 to 89. From 1991 to 2000 he worked as Media consultant to the National Literacy Mission and in Electronic media with PTI TV, Home TV, BiTV and Kingfisher.com, before starting his own documentary making company. From 2004 to 2008 he worked as director of LeapYears and started his heritage walks and shortly thereafter began writing on Delhi and on issues connected to culture, language and communalism.